

# THE TROONS OF SPACE

# fantastic

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11

NOVEMBER

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## F.O.B. VENUS

NOVEMBER, 1958

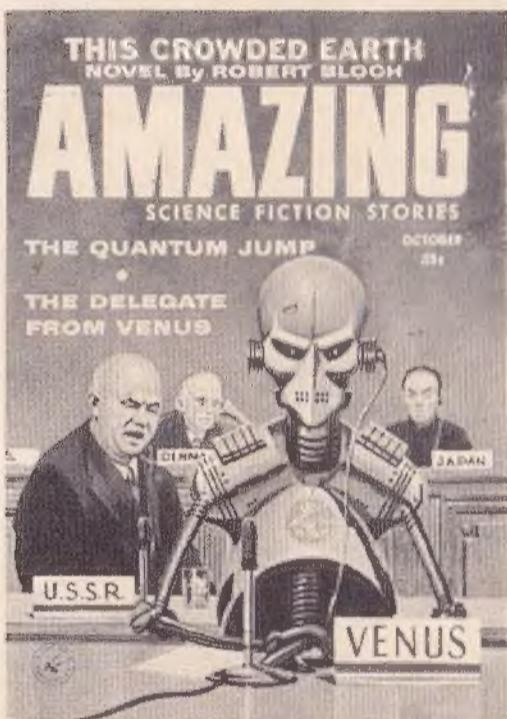
FANTASTIC

VOL. 7 NO. 11



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# fantastic

NOVEMBER 1958  
Volume 7 Number 11

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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Cover: GABE KEITH

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY, One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y. William Ziff, President; W. Bradford Briggs, Vice President; Michael Michaelson, Vice President and Circulation Director; Victor C. Stabile, Treasurer; Albert Gruen, Art Director.



## **THEY SAY THAT PARTING—**

—is such sweet sorrow. Phooey! It's not sweet at all. I've known you too long, from the editor's chair of *Fantastic* to find anything sweet about saying good-bye. But it has to be done so here goes: So long to each and every one of you. A new editor, Norman Lobsenz is taking over and I'm going home and catch up on a few dozen reams of writing that I've fallen behind on these last three years.

You'll like Norm. He's a human dynamo with a lot of ideas for bettering your favorite fiction book—ideas you'll see during the coming months in the form of even more entertaining *Fantastics* than the ones you've read so faithfully during the past years.

We had a lot of fun and read some great stories together and one of the joys of being on the outside will be getting the books the way you do; picking up a new copy of *Fantastic* and being surprised by what's inside. And you can be sure I'll keep a close watch. Just as Ray Palmer kept an eye on Howard Browne, and Howard in turn called me up once in a while and said, "Look, buster. Start getting up a little earlier in the morning. I didn't like the lead story in that last issue." Now Norm will be getting those calls from me.

But while one "talent" is supplanted by another, Cele Goldsmith will stay right where she is, running the place, getting the books out, and keeping everyone's feet on the ground.

So, good luck, good reading, and good-bye from—PWF

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# ACCORDING TO YOU...

Dear Editor:

The quality of stories in *Fantastic* has gradually been rising ever since the Shaver Mystery issue. The September issue was definitely no exception.

The lead story, "Call Me Monster" was very good. One of the best psychological horror stories I've read in a long time. Let's have more from Vandenburg. "In This Dark Mind" was also a real thriller.

Whatever happened to the Space Club? I used to really like that department.

When are you going to get a cover by Freas or Emsh? I'm getting tired of seeing Valigursky on every one. Surely you can get some others to do covers.

Now, with the novels, *Amazing* has almost regained the status it held as a pulp. Why not see if you can do the same thing for *Fantastic*.

Michael Deckinger  
85 Locust Avenue  
Millburn, N. J.

• *A book-length novel in Fantastic too? How about it folks?*

Dear Editor:

The October issue of *Fantastic* was one of the best ones that I have ever obtained. I thought that "Call Me Monster" was fairly interesting. I enjoyed the letters from the readers.

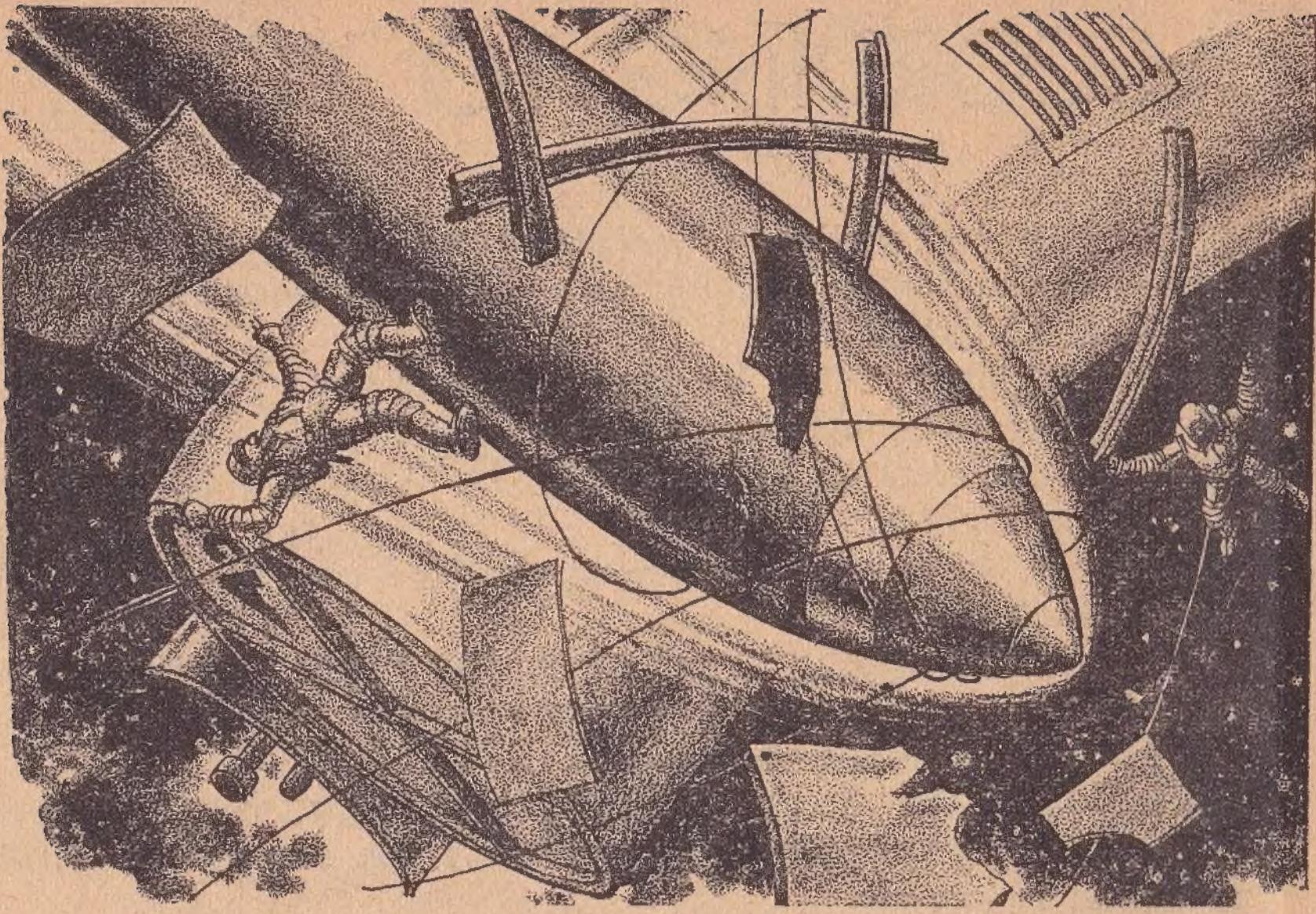
James W. Ayers  
609 First Street  
Attalla, Alabama

• *Fantastic would certainly not be the same magazine without the letter column.*

Dear Editor:

I liked the August issue of *Fantastic*, particularly "The Girl Who Played Wolf." It had a strange way of combining fear

(Continued on page 128)



# THE TROONS OF SPACE

By JOHN WYNDHAM

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

THE SPACE STATION

A. D. 1994

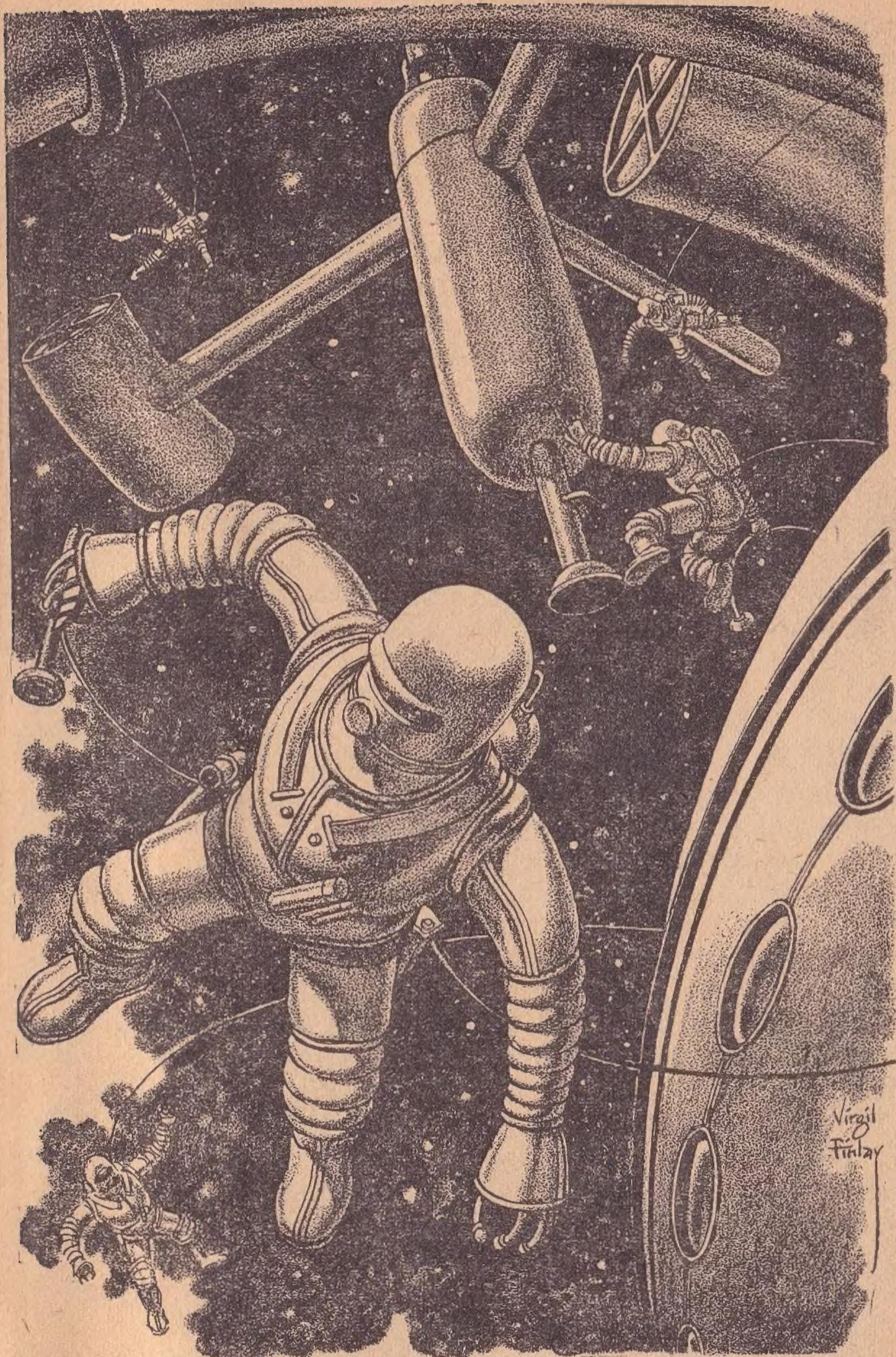
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*You're going to like the Troons. There are several generations of them, and in a series of distinguished novelettes, John Wyndham sends the Troon men farther and farther into space. In this first adventure, we meet Trigger Troon as he comes to grips with space. The succeeding adventures will appear in future issues of FANTASTIC.*

---

TICKER TROON emerged from his final interview filled with an emulsion of astonishment, elation, respect, and conviction that he needed refreshment.

The interview had begun formally, as he had expected. Announced by the clerk, he had marched in smartly, and



The projectile crashed in, making a shambles

come to attention before the wide desk. The old boy behind it had turned out to be a considerably older boy than he had been prepared for, but his type was authentic. Lean, he was, with a handsome, slightly weathered, aristocratic face, carefully trimmed hair that was quite white, and rows of ribbons on his left breast.

He had raised his eyes from a clipful of forms to inspect his visitor carefully, and even at that point Ticker had begun to have a suspicion that the interview was not going to be entirely routine, for the old boy—or, to identify him more fully, Air Marshal Sir Godfrey Wilde—did not employ simply that keen-eyed air of summing one's man up at leisure and appearing incompletely satisfied, which had been the drill at lower grades of interview. He was really looking at Ticker as a person, and somewhat oddly, too. Still looking, he nodded slowly to himself, two or three times.

"Troon," he said, reflectively. "Flight-Lieutenant George Montgomery Troon. Very probably known in some circles, I suspect, as Ticker Troon?"

Ticker had been startled.  
"Er—yes, sir."

The old boy smiled a little. "The young are seldom very original. G. M. Troon—G.M.T.—hence, deviously, Ticker."

He had gone on regarding Ticker steadily, with a length of inspection that passed the bounds of custom, and of comfort. Ticker grew embarrassed, and had to resist the temptation to shift uneasily. The old boy became aware of the awkwardness. His face relaxed into a smile that was friendly, and reassuring.

"Forgive me, my boy. I was fifty years away," he said.

He glanced down at the forms. Ticker recognized some of them. His whole life history was there. Troon, G.M., aged twenty-four, single, C of E. Parentage . . . education . . . service details . . . medical report . . . C.O.'s report . . . security report, no doubt . . . probably a private-life report . . . notes on his friends, and so on, and so on . . . Quite a bundle of stuff, altogether. The old boy evidently thought so, too, for he pushed it all aside with a touch of impatience, waved his hand at an easy chair, and slid over a silver cigarette-box.

"Sit down there, my boy," he invited.

"Thank you, sir," Ticker

had said. And he had taken the offered cigarette, doing his best to give an impression of ease.

"Tell me," said the old boy, in a friendly tone, "what made you apply for transfer from Air to Space?"

It was an expected, standard question, to which there was a standard answer, but it was not put in the standard way, and, with the man's eye thoughtfully upon him, Ticker decided against giving the standard reply. He frowned, a little uncertainly.

"It isn't easy to explain, sir. In fact, I'm not honestly sure that I know. It—well, it isn't exactly that I *had* to do it. But there is a kind of inevitable feeling about it—as if it were a thing I was bound to do, sooner or later. My natural next step . . ."

"Next step," repeated the air marshal. "Not your crowning ambition, then? Next step towards what?"

"I don't really know, sir. Outwards, I think. There's a sort of sense I can't explain . . . a kind of urge onwards and outwards. It is not a sudden idea, sir. It seems always to have been there, at the back of my mind. I'm afraid it all sounds a bit vague . . ." He let himself trail off, inadequately.

But the old boy did not seem to find it inadequate. He gave a couple of his slow nods, and leant back in his chair. For a few moments he gazed up at the cornice of the ceiling, seeming to search his memory. Presently, he said:

*"... for all the night  
I heard their thin gnat-  
voices cry  
Star to faint star across the  
sky."*

He brought his gaze down to Ticker's surprised face.

"That mean anything to you?" he asked.

Hesitantly, Ticker said:

"I think so, sir. Where does it come from?"

"I was told it was Rupert Brooke—though I've never found the context. But the man I first heard it from was your grandfather."

"My — my grandfather, sir?" Ticker stared at the older man.

"Yes. The other George Montgomery Troon — and does it surprise you to know that he was Ticker Troon, too? Grandfather!" He shook his head, ruefully. "It always seems to be a word for old fellows like me. But Ticker—well, he never had the chance. He was dead, you know, before he was your age."

"Yes, sir. Did you know him well?"

"I did indeed. We were in the same squadron when it happened. You look amazingly like him. I was expecting you, of course; nevertheless, it gave me quite a shock when you came in." The air marshal had paused at that, somewhat lengthily. Then he went on: "He had that feeling, too. He flew because that was as far *outwards* as we could get in those days—as far as most of us ever expected to get. But not Ticker. I can remember even now the way he used to look up at the night sky, at the moon and the stars, and talk about them as if it were a foregone conclusion that we'd be going out there someday—and sadly, too, because he knew that he'd never be going out there himself. We used to think it comic-strip stuff in those days, but he'd smile off the ragging and the arguments as if he just *knew.*" There had been another long pause then before he added: "God, I'm sorry old Ticker can't know about this. If there's one thing that'd make him as pleased as Punch, it'd be to know that his grandson wants to go 'out there'."

"Thank you, sir. It's good to know that," Ticker had

told him. And then, feeling that the ball had been passed to him, he added: "He was killed over Germany, wasn't he, sir?"

"Berlin. August, 1944," said the air marshal. "A big op. His aircraft blew up." He sighed, reminiscently. "When we got back, I went to see his wife, your grandmother. She was a lovely girl, a sweet girl. She took it hard. She went away somewhere, and I lost touch with her. She is still alive?"

"Very much so, sir. She married again in, I think, 1949."

"I'm glad of that. Poor girl. They were only married a week before he was killed, you know."

"Only a week, sir. I didn't know it was as short as that. Really no time at all."

"It was. So your father, and consequently yourself, may be said to exist at all, only by a very narrow margin. They had married a little earlier than they intended. Perhaps Ticker had a premonition: most of us did, though some of us were wrong."

There was another pause which lasted until the air marshal roused himself from his thoughts to say:

"You have stated here that you are single."

"Yes, sir," agreed Ticker.

He became abruptly conscious of the special license in his pocket, and all but looked down to see if it were protruding.

"That was a condition of application, of course," said the old man. "Are you, in fact, unmarried?"

"Yes, sir," Ticker said again, with an uneasy feeling that the pocket might have become transparent.

"And you have no brother?"

"No, sir."

The air marshal remarked, consideringly:

"The stated purpose of this qualification is at variance with my experience. I have never found in war that the married officer is less redoubtable than the single man; rather the other way, in fact. One is led to suspect, therefore, that the matter of pensions and subsequent responsibilities is allowed inappropriate weight. Would you say that it is a good principle that our fittest young men should not infrequently be dissuaded from procreation while the less fit retain the liberty to breed like rabbits?"

"Er—no, sir," Ticker said, wonderingly.

"Good," said the air marshal. "I am very glad to hear it."

He maintained such a steady regard that Ticker was all but impelled to confess the presence of the license; Prudence, however, still kept a fingertip hold on him. When the old boy had spoken again, it was to turn the interview onto more conventional lines for a change.

"You understand the need for top security in this work?" he inquired.

Ticker felt easier.

"Security has been very much stressed all along, sir."

"But you don't know why?"

"I've been given no details, sir."

"Nevertheless, as an intelligent young man you must have formed some ideas."

"Well, sir, from what I have heard and read about experimental space missiles, I should think the time can't be far off now when we shall start to build some kind of space-station—possibly a manned satellite. Would it be something of that sort?"

"It would indeed, my boy—though your deductions are not quite up to date, I'm glad to say. The space-station already exists—in parts. And some of the parts are already

up there. Your job will be to help in the assembly."

Ticker's eyes widened, lit up with enthusiasm.

"I say, sir, that's wonderful. I'd no idea . . . I thought we were rather behind in this sort of thing. Assembling the first space-station . . . !" He trailed off, incoherently.

"I did not say it was the first," the old man reminded him. "In fact, there *may* be others."

Ticker looked shocked. The air marshal amplified:

"It doesn't do to take things for granted. After all, we know that the Americans, and the Other Fellows, too, have been working hard on it—and our resources are nothing like theirs."

Ticker stared.

"I thought we'd be working with the Americans, sir."

"So we ought to be. We're certainly not working against them, but it just so happens that our people remember *their* love of public announcements at politically happy moments; and *they* remember certain leaks in our security system. Result: we go our different ways—with a great waste of time and energy in duplication of work. On the other hand, it will allow us to stand on our own feet in space

—if that expression may be permitted—instead of being taken along as poor relations. That might one day turn out to have its advantages in definite terms."

"I suppose so, sir. And the Other Fellows . . . ?"

"Oh, they're at work on it, all right. They were known to be working on an unmanned satellite forty years ago when the Americans stole their thunder by making the first public announcement on satellites. One would guess they were thought to be ahead then; hence the announcement. But just how far they've got now is a matter on which this department would like a lot more information than it has."

"Now, as to yourself: first of all there'll be conditioning and training . . ."

Ticker's thoughts were far too chaotic for him to give proper attention to the details that followed. He was looking beyond the walls of the sunlit office and already seeing the fire-pointed blackness of space. In imagination he could feel himself floating in the void. In a—abruptly he became aware that the air marshal had ceased to talk, and was looking at him as if after a question. He tried to pull himself together.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir. I didn't quite follow . . ."

"I can see I'm wasting my time now," the old man had said, but without rancour. Indeed, he had smiled. "I've seen that look before. I think you'll do. But perhaps one day you'll be good enough to explain to me why a Troon is habitually thrown into a form of hypnotic trance at the thought of space." He rose. Ticker jumped up, quickly. "Remember the security—this is *top* secret. The kind of thing you would not let even your wife guess — if, of course, you were so fortunate as to have one. You appreciate that?"

"I do, sir."

"Good-bye, then—er—Ticker. And good luck."

Ticker had thanked him in a not quite steady voice.

Afterwards, in the first convenient saloon-bar, with a whiskey in front of him, he pulled the special marriage-license out of his pocket, and considered it again. He wished now that he had not been so carried away; that he had listened with more care to what the old boy had been telling him. Something about a conditioning course of twelve weeks, and studying the space-station, both in

plan and mock-up. And something about a bit of leave, too. Could that be right? After all, if they had some of the sections up there already, wouldn't they be about finished by the time he was trained and ready to go? He was momentarily alarmed—until his common-sense asserted itself: you couldn't just throw the pieces of a space-station up into the sky and let them come together. Every part must be ferried there, laboriously, monotonously, very, very expensively, and in quite small bits at a time. It would be far and away the most costly structure ever built. There would have to be heaven knew how many journeys up there before they had enough even to start on the assembly. Thinking of only that aspect of the problem caused him to swing gloomily to the other extreme—why, it was more likely to take years before it could be fully assembled and in working order. They would most probably seem to be very long years.

He dredged around in his mind for what the old boy had said about spells of duty: four weeks on, four weeks off—though that was hypothetical at present, and might need modification in the light of experience. All the same, the

intention sounded generous enough, not bad at all . . .

He returned his attention to the marriage license in his hand. There could be no doubt that from an official point of view, no such document should exist—on the other hand, if an air marshal chose to reveal clearly what he thought of the ban . . . With such eminence on his side, even though unofficially . . .

Well, why delay? He'd got the job . . .

He folded the paper carefully, and restored it to his pocket. Then he strode purposefully to the telephone-box . . .

Ticker, standing in the mess-room of the hulk, and gazing out of the window, took his breakfast gloomily.

The hulk, as it had become known, even on official memos, was the one habitable spot in thousands of miles of nothing. It was the local office of works, and also the hostel for the men serving their tour of duty. Down its shadow-side, windows ran almost the full length, giving a view of the assembly area. The few ports to sunward were kept shuttered. On the outer sunside of the hull was mounted a ring of parabolic reflectors, none more than a

foot across, and all precisely angled. When the eye of the sun shone full in the center of the ring they were inactive, but it never did for long, and a variation of a degree or two would bring one or other of the reflectors into focus, collecting intense heat. Presently, a small, invisible explosion of steam would correct the error by its recoil, and slowly the hulk would swing a little until another reflector came into focus, and give another correction. It went on all the time save for the brief "nights" in the Earth's shadow, so that the view from the leeward windows never altered: it was always the space-station assembly.

Ticker broke a roll, still warm from the oven operated by a larger reflector on the sunside. He left the larger part of it hanging in the air while he buttered the lesser. He munched absent-mindedly, and took a jet of hot coffee. Then he relinquished the plastic coffee-bottle, and let it float while he reached back the rest of the roll before it could waft further. All these actions he performed without conscious thought. They had quickly ceased to be novelties and become part of the natural background conditions to one's tour of duty—so cus-

tomary that it was, rather, a propensity to poise things conveniently in mid-air when one was at home on leave that had to be checked.

Munching his roll, Ticker continued to regard the view with distaste. However enthusiastic one might be about the project as a whole, a sense of ennui and impatience to be away inevitably set in during the last few days of a spell. It had been so on the verge of his five previous leaves, and this time, for special reasons, it was more pronounced:

Outside, the curve of the Earth made a backdrop to half the windows' span, though there was no telling which continent faced him at the moment. Cloud hid the surface and diffused the light as it did most of the time, so that he seemed to be looking, not at a world, but at a segment of a huge pearl resting in a bed of utter blackness. As a foreground, there was the familiar jumble of work in progress.

The main framework of the station had already been welded together, a wheel-like cage of lattice girders, one hundred and forty feet in diameter, and twenty-four feet thick. It sparkled in the unobstructed sunlight with a

harsh silver glitter that was trying to the eyes. A few panels of the plating were already fixed, and small, bulbous-looking figures in space-suits were maneuvering more sheets of metal into positions within the framework. The littered, chaotic impression of the whole scene was enhanced by the web of lines which criss-crossed it. Safety-lines and mooring-lines ran in every direction. There were a dozen or more from the hulk to the main assembly, and no single component, section, or instrument was without a tether to fasten it to some other. None of the lines was taut; if one became so, it remained like that for no more than a second or two. Most of them were continually moving in loops, like lazy snakes; others just hung, with barely perceptible motion. Every now and then one of the workers on the framework would pause as a case or an item of the structure as yet unused came nuzzling gently at the girders. He would give it a slight shove, and it would drift away again, its cable coiling in slow-motion behind it.

A large cylinder, part of the atmosphere regeneration plant, swam into Ticker's

view, on its way from the hulk to the assembly. The space-suited man who was ferrying it over had hooked himself to it, and was directing their mutual slow-progress by occasional, carefully aimed blasts from a wide-mouthed pistol. He and his charge were floating free in space but for his thin life-line undulating back to the hulk. There was no sense whatever that all this was taking place as they hurtled round the Earth at a speed of thousands of miles per hour. One was no more aware of it than one was of the pace at which the Earth hurtles round the sun.

Ticker paused in his eating to appreciate the skill of the pistol user; it looked easy, but everyone who had ever tried it knew that it was a great deal easier to set oneself and the load spinning giddily all ways over. That did not happen so often now that the really ham-handed had been weeded out, but a little misjudgment could start it in a moment. He grunted approval, and went on eating, and reflecting . . .

Four days now, four more days, and he would be back home again . . . And how many spells before it would

be finished? he wondered. They were holding a sweep on that, with quite a nice prize. The schedules drawn up in comfortable offices back on Earth had gone to pieces at once. In real experience of the conditions progress with the earlier stages had been a great deal slower than the estimates had reckoned. Tricks, techniques, and devices had to be evolved to meet difficulties that the most careful consideration had overlooked. There had also been two bad holdups: one, because someone in logistics had made a crass error in the order of despatch, the other on account of a parcel of girders that had never arrived, and was now presumably circling the Earth as a lonely satellite on its own account—if it had not shot away into space.

Working in weightless conditions had also been more troublesome than they had expected. It was true that objects of great bulk and solidity could be shifted by a touch, so that mechanical handling was unnecessary; but, on the other hand, there was always the “equal and opposite reaction” to be considered and dealt with. One was forever seeking anchorage and purchase before any,

force whatever could be applied. The lifetime habit of depending on one's weight was only slightly less than an instinct; the mind went on assuming that weight, just as it went on trying to think in terms of "up and down" until it had been called to order innumerable times.

Ticker left off watching the guided drift of the cylinder, and took a final jet of coffee. He looked at the clock. Still half an hour to go before the shift changed; twenty minutes before he needed to start getting into his space suit and testing it. He lit a cigarette, and because there was nothing else to do, found himself moodily contemplating the scene outside, once more. The cigarette was half finished when the ship's speaker system grated, and announced:

"Mr. Troon please call at the radio cabin. Radio message for Mr. Troon, please."

Ticker stared at the nearest speaker for an apprehensive moment, and then ground out the remains of his cigarette against the metal wall. With a clicking and scraping of magnetic soles he made his way out of the mess-room. In the passage, he disregarded the rules, and sent himself scudding along with a shove.

He caught the radio-cabin's door handle and grounded his feet in one complicated movement. The radio operator looked up.

"Quick work, Ticker. Here you are." He handed over a folded piece of paper.

Ticker took it in a hand that irritated him by shaking slightly. The message was brief. It said simply:

"Happy birthday from Laura and Michael."

He stood staring at it for some seconds, and then wiped his hand across his forehead. The radio man looked at him thoughtfully.

"Funny things happen' in space," he remarked. "Must be quite six months since you last had a birthday. Many happy returns, all the same."

"Thank you very much," said Ticker vaguely, and pulled himself out of the cabin.

Outside he stood reading the short message again.

Michael, they had decided, if it were a boy: Anna, for a girl. But early, by at least a fortnight. Still, what did that matter?—except that he had hoped to be on hand. The important thing was "happy birthday," which .. meant "both doing well."

He became untranced suddenly, and pushed back into the radio-cabin. The dressing-

bell for the next shift went while he was scribbling his reply. A few moments later he was whizzing down the passage, headed for the suit-store.

When the Ticker's turn came, he stepped to the edge of the open airlock, clipped the eye of his short lead round the guide-line, and then with a two-legged push-off against the side of the hulk, sent himself shooting out along the line towards the assembly. Practice had given all of them a pride in their ability to deal dexterously with the conditions; a quick twist, something like that of a falling cat, brought his feet round to act as buffers at the end of his journey. He unhooked from the guide line, and hooked on to a local life-line, obeying the outside worker's Rule Number One—that he should never for a moment work unattached. Then he pushed across to the far side of the frame where assembly was going on. One of the workers there saw him coming, and turned his head towards him so that his tight-beam radio sounded in Ticker's helmet louder than the all-round reception. His words were clear.

"All yours," he said. "And

welcome to it. This plate's a rough one."

Ticker came up to him. They exchanged lines.

"Be seeing you," said the other, and gave a yank on the line which took him back the way Ticker had come. Ticker shook his new safety-line to send it looping out of his way, and turned to give his consideration to the plate.

The new shift adjusted their general intercom radios to low power so that they could converse comfortably between themselves. They noticed the progress made since their last spell, compared it with the plan, identified the sections at hand, and started in.

Ticker looked his plate over, and then twisted it so that the markings lined up. It was not such a tough one after all, and slipped quite easily into place. He was not surprised. One got tired, and not infrequently a little stupid, by the end of a shift.

With the plate fixed, he paused, looking out at Earth with his eyeshield raised so that he saw it fully, in all its brilliance—a great shimmering globe that filled half the sky. Quite extensive patches here and there were free of cloud now, and through them there was blue; the sea, per-

haps—and then again, perhaps not, for whenever one saw the surface it looked blue, just as the blackness of space seen from the Earth in daylight looked blue.

Somewhere over there, on that great shining ball, he now had a son. The idea came to him as a marvel. He could picture Laura smiling as she held the baby to her. He smiled to himself, and then chuckled. He had smuggled himself a family in spite of the regulations, and if they did find out now—he shrugged. And anyway, he had a well-grounded suspicion that he was not the only family man among his supposedly celibate companions. He did not underestimate the Security boys; he simply thought it likely that others besides the air marshal found a blind eye convenient. In just four days more—A nudge at his back interrupted him. He turned to find another plate that someone had pushed along for his attention. Gripping a girder between his knees for anchorage, he started to twist it into position.

Half an hour later a tight-beam radio voice from the hulk overrode their local conversation.

"Unidentified object coming up," it announced, and gave a constellation bearing. The working party's heads turned towards Aries. The great stars flaring there against the multitudinous speckling of the rest looked no different from usual.

"Not a dispatch, you mean?" someone asked.

"Can't be. We've had none notified."

"Meteor?" someone else suggested, with a trace of uneasiness.

"We don't think so. There's been a slight change of course since radar picked it up a couple of hours ago. That seems to rule out meteors."

"Can't you get the telescope on it?"

"Only for a glimpse. The damned hulk's hunting too much, we're trying to steady her up."

"Could it be that parcel of girders, do you think? The lot that went astray. Couldn't it be that its homing gear has just got the range of us?"

"Might be, I suppose," admitted the voice from the hulk. "It's certainly got a line straight on us now. If it is, the proximity gear should stop it and hold it about a couple of miles off, and you'll need to send somebody out with a line to make it fast."

Plenty of time to see about that later. We'll keep you informed, once we can get this damned tub steady enough to keep the glass on it."

His wave cut off, and the assembly party, after vainly scanning the Aries region again, turned back to their work. Nearly an hour passed before the voice from the hulk spoke once more.

"Hullo there, Assembly!" it said, and without waiting for acknowledgement, went on: "There's something damned funny about that thing in Aries. It certainly isn't the girder package. We don't know what it is."

"Well, what's it *look* like?" inquired one of the working party, patiently.

"It's—er—well, it's like a large circle, with three smaller circles set at thirds round the perimeter."

"You don't say!"

"Well, that's what we see, damn it! The thing's head on to us. The circles may be mile-long cylinders, for all we can tell."

Again the helmeted heads of the working party turned towards Aries.

"Can't see anything. Is it blasting?"

"There's no sign of blast. It looks as if it's free-falling at

us. Just a minute—" He broke off. Five minutes passed before he came in again. This time his tone was more serious.

"We radioed a description to base, asking for info. and identification. Their reply is just in. It reads: 'No repeat no dispatch you since Number 377K four days ago stop Design of object as described not repeat not known here stop Pentagon states not repeat not known them stop consider possible craft/misile hostile stop treat as hostile taking all precautions ends.'"

For some moments no one spoke. The helmets of the working party turned as they looked at one another in astonishment.

"Hostile! For God's sake! Why, every bloody thing out here's hostile," somebody said.

"Precautions!" said another voice. "What precautions? What is there?"

Ticker inquired:

"Have we any interception missiles?"

"No," said the voice from the hulk. "They're scheduled, but they are away down the fitting-out list yet."

"Hostile?" murmured another voice. "But who?"

"Who do you think? Who'd

rather we didn't have a station out here?"

"But 'hostile,'" the man said again. "It would be an act of war—to attack us, I mean."

"Act of nothing," said the second man. "Who even knows we're up here, except the Department; and now, apparently, the Other Fellows. Say we were attacked, and blown up—what'd happen? Sweet damn all. Nothing but hush from both sides. Not even denials . . . just hush."

"Everybody seems to be taking a lot for granted, considering that nobody even knows what the thing is," someone pointed out.

That, Ticker admitted, was true enough, but somewhat legalistic, for it was difficult to believe that anything could happen to be travelling this particular section of space by sheer accident, and if it were not accidental, then it followed that the intention of any visiting object that did not originate with their Department must be either observatory, or hostile.

He turned his head again, surveying the myriad suns that flared in the blackness. The first comment had been right; it was *all* hostile. For a moment he felt that hostil-

ity all about him more keenly than at any time since he had first forced himself to push out of the hulk's airlock into nothingness. His memory of that sensation had been dulled, but now, abruptly, he was the intruder again; the sumptuous creature thrusting out of his natural element; precariously self-launched among a wrack of perils. Odd, he thought, in a kind of parenthesis, that it should need the suspicion of human hostility to reawaken the sense of the greater hostility constantly about them. Odd, indeed.

He became conscious that the others were still talking. Someone had inquired about the object's speed. The hulk was replying:

"Difficult to estimate more than roughly, head on, but doesn't seem to be high, relative to our own. Certainly unlikely to be more than two hundred miles an hour difference, we judge—could well be less. You ought to be able to see it soon. It's starting to catch the earthlight."

There was no sign of it in the Aries sector yet. Somebody said:

"Should we get back aboard, Skip?"

"No point in it . . . It wouldn't help at all if that thing

*does have a homer set on the hulk."*

"True," agreed someone, and sang gently: "'Dere's no hidin' place out here.'"

They went on working, casting occasional glances into the blackness. Ten minutes later, two men exclaimed simultaneously; they had caught one small, brief flare among the stardust.

"Starboard jet correcting course," said the voice from the hulk. "That settles one thing. It's live, and it is homing on us. Swinging now. It'll recorrect in a moment."

They watched intently. Presently, nearly all of them caught a glimpse of the little jet of flame that steadied the object's swing. A man swore:

"Damn it! And us here, like sitting pigeons. One little guided missile to meet it. That's all that's needed. Pity one of the Department's great brains didn't allow for that, isn't it?"

"What about an oxygen tube?" someone suggested. "Fix up one of the dispatch homers on it, and let it jet itself along till they meet."

"Good idea—if we had a day or so to fix the homer," agreed another.

Presently the object caught more of the earthlight, and

they were able to keep its location marked, though not yet able to distinguish its shape. A consultation went on between the leader of the working party and the commander of the hulk. It was decided not to take the party inboard. If the thing were indeed a missile and set to explode on contact or at close proximity; then the situation would be equally hopeless wherever one was; but should it, on the other hand, fail to explode on contact and simply cause impact damage to the hulk, it might be useful to have the party outside, ready to give what help it could.

On that decision, the men in space-suits started to push themselves off, and drift through the web of girders towards the hulkward side of the assembly. There they exchanged their local safety-lines for others attached to the hulk, and were ready to pull themselves across, if necessary.

They waited in an uneasy group, a surrealist cluster of grotesque figures anchored to the framework at eccentric angles by their magnetic soles while they watched the oncoming object, the "craft-missile" grow slowly larger.

Soon they could distinguish the outline described; three

small circles set about a larger. It was from the small circles that a correcting puff of flame came now and then.

"It's my guess, from the general look of the thing, and its slow speed," the hulk commander's voice said, dispassionately, "that it's half-missile, half-mine; a kind of hunting mine. I'd guess, too, by the way it is aligned on us that it is a contact type. Might be chemical, or nuclear—probably chemical; if it were nuclear a proximity fuse would be good enough. Besides, a nuclear explosion would be detectable from Earth. With a chemical explosion out here you'd want all the concentration of force you can get—hence contact."

No one seemed disposed to question the commander's deductions. There could be no doubt that it was aligned on them. The swinging was so slight that they could see no more than the head-on view.

"Estimated relative speed about one hundred and twenty miles an hour," added the commander.

Slow, Ticker thought, very slow—probably to keep maneuverability in case of evasive action by its target. There was nothing one could do but stand there, and wait for it.

"E.T.A. now five minutes," the voice from the hulk told them, calmly.

They waited.

Ticker found a new understanding of the stringent security regulations. Hitherto, he had taken it for granted that their purpose was to preserve the lead. Clearly, once it should be known that any nation had a space-station under construction, those who had it only in the drawing-board stage would press on, and the pace would grow warmer. The best way to avoid that was secrecy, and if necessary to show astonishment that any such device was being seriously contemplated. That had seemed reasonable; there was nothing to be gained by creating a situation where construction would have to be rushed, and possibly a lot might be lost by it. The thought of an attack on the station before it was even finished had never occurred to him.

But if this were indeed a missile, and if it should get the hulk, nobody would survive. And if the Department were to be stung into denouncing the aggression? Well, the Other Fellows would just shrug and deny. "What, us! Why, we never even knew

it existed. Obviously an accident," they would say. "An accident which has now been followed by a vicious and despicable slander in an effort to cover up those responsible."

"Three minutes," said the commander.

Ticker took his eyes from the "craft-missile" and looked about him. His gaze loitered on the moon, a clear, sharp coin, recently risen from behind the blue pearl of Earth. Scarred but serene, it hung on the sky; a silver medal, still waiting to be won. The next leap.

First there had been this little hop of ten thousand miles to make a stepping-stone for the leap of two hundred and twenty-four thousand miles, more or less—and then, not in his time, but someday, there would be still greater leaps beyond. For him, for now, the moon would be enough.

"The moon," murmured Ticker. "'The moon on the one hand, the dawn on the other: the moon is my sister, the dawn is my brother.'"

Suddenly he was swept with a shaking anger. A fury against stupidity and littleness, against narrow, scheming minds that were ready to wreck the greatest adventure of all, as a political move.

What would happen now if their work were destroyed? The cost had been in proportion to the ambition. If all this were lost, would the government be willing, could they even afford, to make a new allocation, and start again? Might it not be that, with such an example, all the rival nations would content themselves with arrangements to blow any other attempted space-stations out of existence? Would that be the end of the great adventure—to be kept earthbound by stalemate and futility . . . ?

"Two minutes," said the voice.

Ticker looked at the missile again. It was swinging a little more now, enough to give glimpses of length, instead of a flat diagram of circles. He watched it curiously. There was no doubt that the roving action was increasing. Correction and re-correction were stronger and more frequent.

"What's happening to it now?" a voice asked. "Kind of losing its touch, isn't it?"

They stared at it in horrid fascination, watching the yawning motion grow wider while the correcting jets spat more fiercely and rapidly. Soon it was swinging so much that they were getting broad-

side views of it—a fat, droplet-shaped body, buttressed by three smaller droplet shapes which housed its driving tubes. The small correcting tubes, so busily employed at this moment, branched laterally in radial clumps from the main-tube nacelles. Its method of working was obvious. Once the homing device had found a line on the target, the main tubes would fire to give directional impetus. Then, either to keep down to maneuverable speed, or simply to economize, they would cut out, leaving it to coast easily to the target while the homer kept it on course by correcting touches from the side tubes. Less obvious, was what had got into it now, and was causing it to bear down on them in a wildly drunken wobble.

"Why the devil should it go nuts and start 'hunting' at this stage?" muttered the leader of the working party.

"That's *it*," said the commander from the hulk, with a sudden hopeful note in his voice. "It *has* gone nuts; all bewitched and bewildered. It's the masses, don't you see? The mass of the hulk is about the same as that of the assembly and parts now. The thing is approaching on a line where they are both equidis-

tant. Its computers are foozled: they can't decide which to go for. It would be bloody funny if it weren't serious. If it can't decide in another few seconds at that speed it'll overshoot any possibility of correcting in time."

They kept on watching the thing tensely. It had, in fact, already lost a little speed, for it was now yawing so widely that the steering tubes' attempts to correct the swing were having some braking effect. For half a minute there was silence. Then someone breathed out, noisily.

"He's right, by heaven! It is going to miss," he said.

Other held breaths were released, and the earphones sounded a huge, composite sigh of relief. It was no longer possible to doubt that the missile would pass right between the hulk and the assembly.

In a final desperate effort to steady up, the port tubes fired a salvo that spun it right round on its own axis as it hurtled along.

"Bloody thing's started waltzing now," observed a voice.

Still wobbling wildly it careened on, in a flaring, soundless rush. Closer it reeled; and closer, until it was

whirling madly past, between them and the hulk.

Ticker did not see what happened next. There was a sudden violent shock which banged his head against the inside of his helmet, and turned everything into dancing lights. For a few seconds he was dazed. Then it came to him that he was no longer holding on to the framework of the assembly. He groped, and found nothing. With an effort, he opened his eyes, and forced them into focus. The first thing they showed him was the hulk and the half-built space-station dwindling rapidly in the distance.

Ticker kicked wildly, and managed to turn himself round, but it took him several moments to grasp what had happened. He found that he was floating in space in company with a collection of minor parts of the assembly and two other space-suited men, while, close by, the missile, now encumbered with a tangle of lines, was still firing its steering tubes while it cavorted and spun in an imbecilic fashion. By degrees he perceived that the missile had in its passage managed to entangle itself in a dozen or more tethers and safety-lines, and torn them away, together

with whatever happened to be attached to them.

He closed his eyes for a moment. His head throbbed. He fancied that it was bleeding on the right side. He hoped the cut was small; if there was much blood it might float around loose in his helmet and get into his eyes. Suddenly the commander's voice in the phone said:

"Quiet everyone." It paused, and went on: "Hullo, hullo there! Calling you three with the missile. Are you all right? Are you all right?"

Ticker ran his tongue over his lips, and swallowed.

"Hullo, Skipper. Ticker here. I'm all right, Skip."

"You don't sound so all right, Ticker."

"Bit muzzy. Knocked my head on my helmet. Better in a minute."

"What about the other two?"

A groggy voice broke in:

"Nobby here, Skipper. I'm all right, too—I think. Been sick as a dog—not funny at all. Don't know about the other. Who is it?"

"Must be Dobbin. Hullo there, Dobbin! Are you all right?"

There was no reply.

"It was a hell of a jerk, Skipper," said the groggy voice.

"How's your air?"

Ticker looked at the dials.

"Normal supply, and reserve intact," he said.

"My reserve isn't registering. Fractured, maybe, but I've got nearly four hours," said Nobby.

"Better cut loose, and make your way back by hand tubes," said the commander. "You right away, Nobby. Ticker, you've got more air. Can you reach Dobbin? If you can, link him on to you, and bring him back with you. Think you will be able to do it without danger?"

"Shouldn't be difficult, I think."

"Look, Skip—" Nobby began.

"That's an order, Nobby," the commander told him briefly.

Kicking himself over, Ticker was able to see one of the space-suited figures fumbling at its belt. Presently the safety-line floated free, though the figure still kept along in company. It drew the pistol-like hand-tube from the holster, and held it in front with both hands, kicking a little as it maneuvered to get the hulk dead behind it in the tube's mirror-sights. Then the tube flared, and the figure holding it dropped

away, slowly at first, then with increasing speed.

"Be seeing you, Ticker," said its voice. "Bacon and eggs?"

"Done both sides, mind," Ticker told him.

He drew his own tube. When he had the second space-suited figure in the mirror, he gave the briefest possible touch on the trigger to set himself drifting towards it. A few moments later he reported:

"I'm afraid old Dobbin's through, Skip. It was quick, though. Bloody great rip in the left leg of his suit. Damn bad luck. Shall I bring him back?"

The commander hesitated a moment.

"No, Ticker," he decided. "It'd just mean an additional hazard for you. Dobbin wouldn't want that. No, cast off his line and let him go, poor chap. Take his reserve air bottle, though—and his tube, too. It'll help you to catch up on Nobby."

There was a brief silence, then:

"That's funny," Ticker murmured.

"What's funny?" demanded the commander.

"Just a minute, Skip."

"What is it, Ticker?"

"The lines have tightened,

Skipper. A minute ago, we and the odd bits were all in a clump, with the missile acting daft alongside. Now it's steadied up, seems to be pulling away. Hell, this is confusing—you aren't where you ought to be, either. The—oh, I get it. The thing's turning; swinging us round after it . . . I'm letting old Dobbin go now . . ." There was a pause. "He's drifting off on a different line, away from me. The thing must be making a wide turn, I think. Difficult to tell just what it is doing; it's giving lots of little bursts as it steadies up. I don't care much for this, Skipper. All the towed bits, including me, have swung together in a jumble."

"Better cast off now, and shove yourself clear."

"Just a minute, Skip. I want to see—" His voice tailed away. "Yes, yes, she is. She's pulling, pulling steadily round . . ."

Ticker was hanging out at the end of his lifeline, watching the constellations wheel slowly, and twisting slowly himself, which made it the more confusing.

The random element introduced into the missile by the conflict of purpose had been sorted out. It was coordinated

again, and its change of direction was steady, smooth, and purposeful. It was, in fact, back on the job. Its radar had searched for, and found, the target it had missed in its temporary derangement, and was bringing it round to bear once more. Somewhere inside the fat metal droplet there were relays ready to go in once it was steady in the aim; a brief burst on the main tubes would send it back to the attack . . .

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Ticker, and began to haul himself hand over hand along his safety-line, shoving aside the trailing flotsam of assembly items as he went, and making for the missile itself.

"What's that about? Why haven't you cast off yet?" inquired the commander.

Ticker did not reply. He had come close to the missile, swung a little out from it by the continuing turn, but able to reach it. Presently he could touch it, and brought round a leg to kick himself clear of the steering-tubes. He pulled himself forward on the length of line remaining, and caught hold of the member which joined one of the nacelles to the main body. It was round all three of these members that the lines had tangled as the missile had

swept past the assembly, and he tied his safety-line short to a loop in the tangle that looked as if it would hold.

"What the devil are you doing, Ticker?" asked the commander.

"I'm aboard the missile, Skipper," Ticker told him.

"For heaven's sake—! You mean you're *on* the damned thing? Look, I told you to cast off. Do I have to make it an order?"

"I hope you won't, Skipper, because I rather think that if you did, and if I obeyed it, I'd very likely have nowhere to go."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it looks to me as if this thing is in the process of getting round to have another go at you."

"Is it, by hell! You sure of that, Ticker?"

"'Fraid so. Don't see what else it can be doing. It's certainly making a steady arc, and if that's its game, this seems to be as good a place as any."

"Wouldn't be my choice. What do you mean?"

"Well, if I'd stayed where I was I'd be fried when it fires its main tubes. And if I cast off now and it does go for you, I stand to die slowly in a space-suit. Not nice, at all.

Whereas this way I get a free ride home. If it misses you, I can roll off: if it doesn't, well, it'll be the same for all of us . . ."

"That's a lot more logical than agreeable. What's it doing now?"

"Still coming round. You lie to port as we go. About twenty degrees more to swing yet. You should be able to observe easily."

"We've got you on the radar, all right, but we can't bring the glass to bear so far to sunward."

"I see. Try to keep you informed," said Ticker.

He worked forward on the metal body. There was enough iron in it to give some traction for his magnetic soles. "Turn still gradual, but steady," he reported. "This thing has a number of knobs and protuberances and so on round the nose," he added. "Five major and several minor. God knows what they are. One or more must be radar."

"With limited range, obviously," said the commander. "Must be, or it would go off chasing the moon, or the Earth, instead of us. That looks as if they must know our distance and the plane of our orbit pretty accurately,

damn them. Given that, it wouldn't be too difficult to make it sure to find us sooner or later. If you can sort out which is the radar, it might be helpful to have a good bash at it."

"Trouble is they aren't like anything I've ever seen," complained Ticker. "It'd be just too bad if the one I bashed turned out to be a fuse."

"Take your time, and make sure. How's she bearing now?"

"Nearly on. Three or four degrees more."

He slid back a bit to a position where he could brace himself on a nacelle member. The intermittent vibration from the starboard tubes ceased, and a new tremor ran through the missile as the port tubes fired to check her.

"She's round now," he told the commander. "Lined up on you, and steadyng."

He waited tensely, gripping with arms and knees as best he could. The main tubes spurted briefly. He felt the missile surge forward. There was a jerk as the lines to the flotsam tightened, and checked it. The tubes fired again. The missile and its tow jerked to and fro on their loose coupling, but only one of the

lines parted, to let a girder section spin off into space on its own. The rest joggled, and the lines looped about until presently the whole conglomeration was in motion on the new line, headed now for the distant hulk, but at a speed somewhat below that of the missile's former attack.

"On our way now, Skip," Ticker reported. "I'll get forward again, and try to see about that radar."

On the nose once more, he tried shielding the protuberances in turn with his gloved hands. There was no apparent effect; certainly no tendency to deviate from the course. He slackened off the life-line a little, and hung over the front to shield as many as possible at once with his body, also without noticeable result. Again he examined the projections. One of them looked as if it might be a small solar-energy cell, but the rest were unidentifiable. He was sure only that some of them must be relaying information to the controls. He sat back, astride the nose of the missile, and feeling the need of a cigarette as he had seldom felt it before.

"Got me beat," he admitted. "I just don't know, Skip. Almost any of them might be any damned thing."

He turned his attention to the spangled blackness about him. The hulk and the assembly, lying dead ahead, were shining more brightly than anything but the sun itself.

"One thing, Skipper," he said. "It won't be like the other try. The turn's brought it round so that you and the assembly are almost in line from here."

"There must be some way of disabling, or disarming the brute. Don't any of those projections unscrew?"

"A couple of them look as if they ought to, but I've no spanners, and I lost the grips when I was snatched off."

Moving forward again, he braced himself as well as he could, and tried to unscrew a graspable portion with his gloved hands. It was a waste of effort. He gave up, and gazed ahead while he recovered his breath. The missile was steady on its course, with barely a tremor of correction to be felt. Distance was difficult to judge but he guessed that he could not be much more than twenty miles from the hulk. Not many minutes . . .

Ticker became aware of sweat trickling down his forehead, and stinging in the corners of his eyes. He shook his head, and worked his eye-

brows to try to get rid of the drops. Presently he slithered clumsily back to the member connecting the port nacelle. He sat on it, lashing himself there as best he could with the life-line. He pressed back on the main body, bracing his feet against the nacelle itself. He drew the two hand-tubes, his own and Dobbin's. He checked their power settings, and then held them on either side of him, their wide mouths pointing outwards, their butts firmly grounded against the metal casing at his back. Like that, he waited.

"Ticker. Bale out now," said the commander.

"I told you, Skip. I'm not for dying slowly in a space-suit."

The hulk, and the assembly beyond it, seemed to be rushing towards him now. His spine was prickling, partly with sweat, partly with the knowledge of the explosive just behind it. He found himself becoming more conscious of it, crawlingly aware of the vast tearing power held in a thin shell, waiting for the impact that would release it. The sweat ran out of every pore, soaking his clothes.

He sat with his head turned to the right, watching the

hulk grow bigger and nearer from eyes that stung with salt. "Not too soon," he told himself. "It mustn't be too soon." But it mustn't be too late, either. He was aware of the commander's voice in the phone again, but he took no notice of it. Would one-mile distance do?— Or would that not be soon enough? No, it should give him just time enough at the rate he was going. He would make it one mile as near as he could judge.... He went on watching, both hands clenched on the tube grips....

Must be about a couple of miles now....

He set his teeth, and pulled both triggers right back for a moment.... The hulk seemed to slide to the left as the missile kicked over more sharply than he had expected. The thing keeled for a moment, like a dancer caught off balance. Then the steering tubes fired a correcting blast. The nose swung back on to the target, and then beyond it. The tubes on the near side fired to correct the overswing: at the same moment Ticker pulled both triggers back, and held them there. With the combined blast reinforcing her new backswing, the missile leapt sideways

and swung broadside to her course at the same time. The constellations whirled round Ticker's head. He looked wildly round for the hulk, and found it back over his left shoulder—and not much more than half a mile away. He prayed that there was not time enough for a correction....

An air missile, with air to grip, and fins to grip it, might have managed a quick correction; but in space, where every movement is a delicate matter of thrust and counter-thrust, time, too, is a highly important factor; oscillation cannot be killed at a stroke, lost equilibrium cannot be regained in a moment....

The angle of diversion needed to get back on course grew more acute every second. Ticker knew suddenly that the thing could not do it. Only the main drive could have exerted enough force to jump it back in time to hit—and experience showed that the main drive liked to be steady in the aim before it fired.

But the side-tubes tried. Ticker braced himself where he sat while the heavens reeled as the missile spun. Then the hulk rushed past in a blur, fifty yards away....

"Done it, by Jiminy! Bloody good show, Ticker!" said a voice.

"Quiet there!" snapped the commander. "Ticker, that was magnificent. Now come off it. Bale out quick."

Ticker, still held by his line, relaxed, feeling all in. The missile, still swinging from side to side, scudded on with him into space.

"Ticker, do you hear me? Bale out!" repeated the commander.

Ticker said wearily:

"I hear you, Skip. But there won't be enough power left in these tubes to get me back to you."

"Never mind. Use what there is as a brake. We'll fetch you in. But get clear of it now!"

There was a pause. Ticker's tired voice said:

"Sorry, Skip. But we don't know what this thing is going to do next, do we?"

"For heaven's sake, man—"

"Sorry, Skip. Mutiny, I'm afraid."

Ticker rested as he was, with his eyes closed. The sight of the constellations swooping to the missile's swings was making him feel sick. He was tired out, his head ached badly, he was soaked through with sweat, it was an effort to think. He sat

as he was until he became aware that the pull on the line that held him in place had changed, and become constant. He opened his eyes, and found himself looking full at the moon.

It was sliding slowly leftwards, and the great curve of the Earth was rising on his right.

"She's going about again," he said drearily. "I wonder if these babies ever run out of fuel?"

Looking down, he found that he was still gripping the hand-tubes. He let them go, and float on their safety-cords while his gloved hands fumbled at the knot of the line which held him. He managed to slacken it off, and dragged himself back on to the main body again. The thing was fairly steady once more, with the starboard tubes firing now and then to turn it; there could be little doubt that it was in the process of coming round for yet another attack. He pulled himself forward on to the nose again, and sat astride of it, holding on to the projecting knobs.

Perched there, and summoning up his strength, he looked about him. Under his left foot lay the pearl-like

Earth, with the night-shadow beginning to creep across her. The sun blazed high to his right. Up to the left the pallid moon lay in a bed of jet scattered with diamond dust.

Lower to his left, but sliding slowly round towards the front, floated the hulk and the glittering spiderwork of girders that would one day be the space-station.

Once more he turned his eyes down to the great globe creeping past his left foot. He watched it steadily for some moments; then he lifted his right hand, and turned the air supply up a little.

"Skipper?" he inquired.

"Receiving you, Ticker," acknowledged the commander. "We've just managed to get the glass on you. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to have a shot at disabling the thing, Skip. I think the line is to have a bash at this short, thick rod-thing in front of me. Can you see it?"

"Yes. I can see it. Might be anything. You're satisfied it's part of the radar gear?"

"Obvious, Skipper."

"Ticker, you're lying. Leave it alone."

"Might be able to dent it a bit. Enough to mess it up."

"Ticker—"

"I know what I'm doing, Skip. Here goes."

Ticker hooked his toes under two of the projections, and gripped with his knees, for the best possible purchase. He took up the hand-tubes, one in each hand, and slammed away at the short, thick rod with all his might. Presently he paused, panting.

"No damned weight. Like hitting with matchsticks," he complained. "Not a mark on it."

He turned the air on a little more, and screwed up his eyes to squeeze the sweat out of them. The missile was still coming round in its big curve. Twenty degrees more would bring it on to the line of attack again.

"Going to try another of them this time," he said, lifting the tubes once more.

Through the telescope the commander watched him start to belabor one of the more slender projections: from the right, from the left, from the right, from the . . .

There was a flash so brilliant that it stung his eyes.

That was all: a vivid, silent flash, shining for its brief moment as brightly as the sun . . .

Then, where it had been,

the glass showed nothing but empty darkness, with small, uncaring stars, thousands of light-years beyond . . .

The air marshal spread the message on his desk, and studied it for several long, thoughtful moments.

His mind went back to the night fifty years ago when the other Ticker had not come back. The same job for grandson as for grandfather. Only it had been easier the first time, with a war on, and the news half-expected. He felt old. He *was* old. Too old, perhaps. If they had not changed the regulations he would have been on the shelf ten years ago at his age . . .

Still, here he was. And he'd tell her himself. Tell this poor girl—just as he had told the other one, long ago. So piteously little he could tell her . . . Lost on a secret mission . . . So cruelly blank . . .

She would know later on, of course—when Security considered it safe. Oh, yes,

she should know. He'd see to that. He would throw all his weight there . . . For sheer cold courage . . . Nothing less than a V.C. . . . Nothing less . . .

He looked back at the security-report for the previous day.

"Subject dispatched radio to Troon. Message: 'Happy birthday from Laura and Michael.' (N.B. Presumed code reference to subject's birth of child, male, on previous evening. Supporting this: (a) Troon's birthday 8th May; (b) his radio reply: 'I love you both.')"

The air marshal sighed, and shook his head in a philosophic manner.

"But at least she has the boy," he murmured. "And she knows he knew about the boy . . . I'm glad he did . . . The old Ticker never even knew there was to be a child . . .

"I hope they meet up there . . . Ought to get on well together. . . ."

THE END

# F. O. B. VENUS

By ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR SCHROEDER

*Sometimes you get the idea, from reading science fiction that if there is intelligent life on other planets and if the natives ever get bored someone ups and yells, "Let's invade Earth!" Then everyone brightens up and away they go. Poor old picked-on Earth! Anyhow, here's a story about some of the most gorgeous invaders you'll ever meet.*

**H**AROLD FOLLANSBEE was the first to see one.

In a world filled with military observers, civil defense watchers, professional astronomers and amateur sighters of flying saucers and other celestial crockery, Harold Follansbee was a most unlikely candidate for the honor of welcoming our first visitor from Outer Space.

Follansbee was a most timid, withdrawn and introverted type (even his toenails were ingrown) and he scarcely ventured outdoors except when journeying to and from his job. He seldom even dared look out of the window since an unfortunate morning when, suffering from a severe hangover, he'd pulled up the shade and discovered that it was bleeding outside.

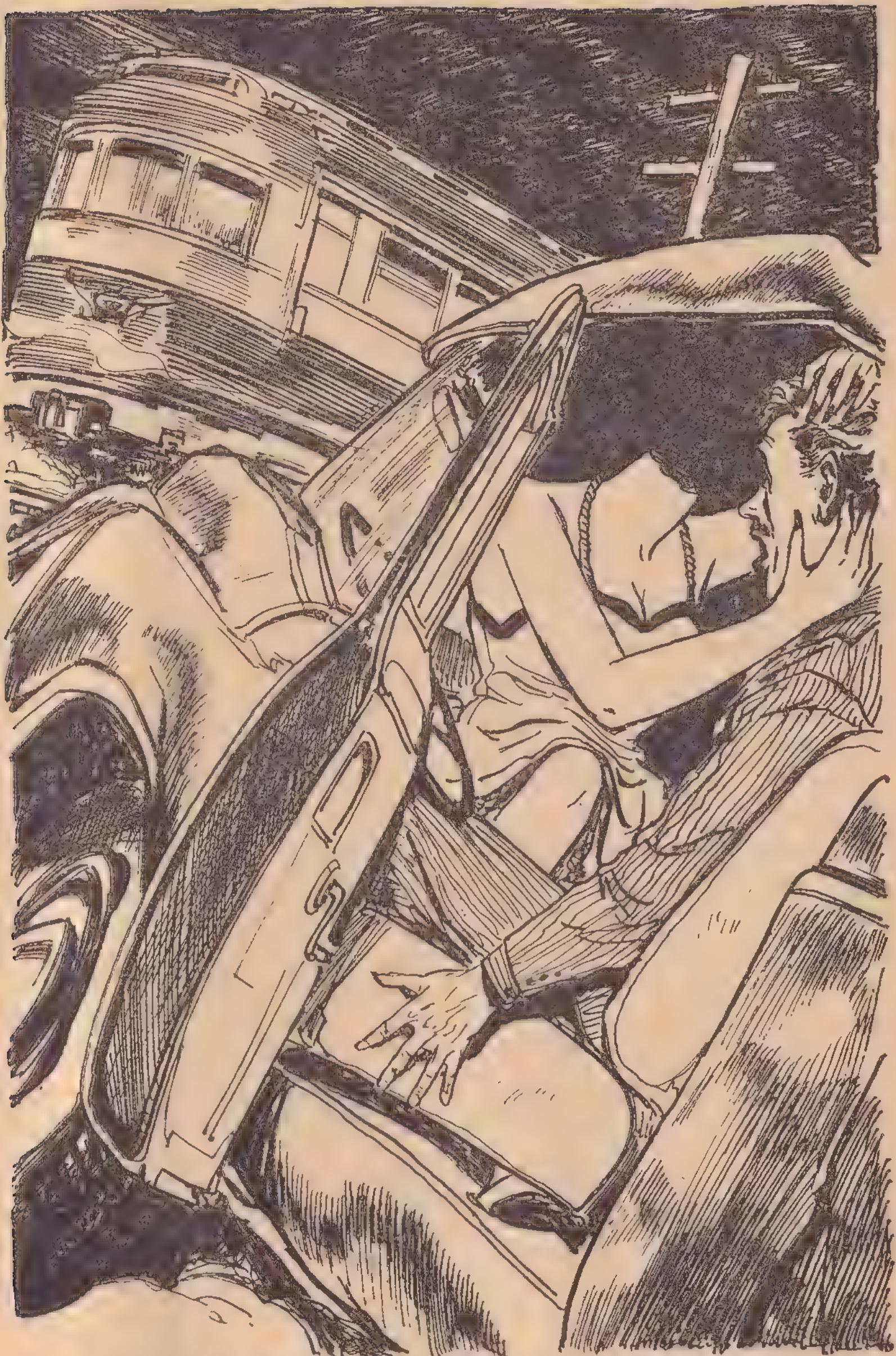
He worked in the heart of downtown Chicago, buried away on the topmost floor of a large music store. Here he served as the clerical custodian of the sheet-music department.

That Harold Follansbee, in this obscure position, would be apt to encounter an Alien, was a most improbable circumstance.

But strange things happen, even in Chicago.

And thus it was that Follansbee became privileged to make the initial contact with an extra-terrestrial presence.

One morning, when the upper storey of the shop was seemingly devoid of customers, he leaned lovingly over a bound volume of Chopin preludes and surreptitiously pen-



Two words sprang into his dazed mind—reflex action!

cilled a mustache on the portrait adorning the latest song number by Jerry Lee Lewis.

It was at this precise moment that Harold Follansbee looked up and confronted a visitor.

Although he did not know it, the fate of the world might conceivably have rested upon his reaction. If Follansbee had done the sensible thing and run, screaming, for his very life, perhaps things might have been different.

But few men, Follansbee included, are apt to flee from the sight of a beautiful woman. And this woman was lovely beyond the dreams of the poets who hymn the praises of *Miss Rheingold*, or even Brigitte Bardot.

There was absolutely nothing about her appearance to suggest an ultra-terrene origin; as a matter of fact, in her lowcut and tightly-fitted dress, she could hardly have looked more earthy.

Nor was there anything to hint that her impromptu visit to the sheet-music department of the store was based on a desire to become better-acquainted with mundane melody, in order to pass successfully as a human being.

Follansbee had no way of knowing that she had hovered above Earth for months in

the mother-ship, before she and her sisters had been catapulted to earth in individual capsules which were destroyed immediately upon landing. He did not realize that during the hovering stage she and her kind spent their time absorbing AM and FM broadcasts to learn the language and pick up news and information. He could not possibly conceive she had acquired a passionate liking for the romantic German ballads of Schubert, Schumann and Hugo Wolf; to a point where her first impulse upon landing on earth was to procure samples of such music for herself.

Even without this knowledge, Follansbee might still have saved the world, had he himself been a reader of science fiction. But he despised the stuff.

Consequently, he attached no meaning or importance to her introductory remarks as she rifled through a stack of art-songs, smiled pleasantly at him, and murmured the first words ever spoken by an Alien to an earth-man—"Take me to your *lieder*."

Joel Francis picked her up in Harold's Club, in Reno. She said her name was Yvette, which Joel Francis didn't ex-

actly believe—inasmuch as his own name was Joe Francisco, or had been before he got out of stir, grew the sideburns, and started hanging around Reno and making a pitch for the divorcees.

But it didn't matter to Joel what her real name was. The important thing was, she was stacked, but good. Two big stacks of silver cartwheels in front of her on the dice-table, and a lot of folding lettuce in her big purse. The moment Joel noticed, he was attracted to her.

When he got a chance to look behind the stacks, he found that she had a wealth of personal assets, too. Best of all, she was alone and a stranger in town. After striking up a conversation (it isn't difficult, if you have sideburns like Joel Francis, and you work your way over to a place next to a dame at the dice-table and haul out a silver dollar and smile at her and say, "Will you bet this one for me, for luck?") he did his best to convince her that she was not alone any more and need not be a stranger.

The next step was in the direction of the bar. Here, Joel found out all that he wanted or needed to know. She was alone and she was in the chips. Yvette wouldn't tell

him anything about her divorce, but that didn't mean anything. A lot of these chicks played it cool when it came to discussing personal matters—particularly when they were as flashy as she was. Usually, it was because they'd been hitched to some old pappy guy with a fat bankroll and they came out here to cut in on it *via* the alimony route. They knew they had a soft touch, and they were sort of embarrassed.

Joel didn't care. He knew when *he* had a soft touch, too, and he wasn't embarrassed at all. His specialty was playing this kind of babe for all she was worth, going the whole route from cocktails to fun and games. He had a buddy named Cono who stayed in the background, but somehow always managed to show up at various motels at the oddest hours. This buddy was sort of a photographybug, you might say, and he took some real unusual pictures. He was real proud of the pictures, too; he always managed to bring the prints around later and show them to the dames and ask if they wanted to buy some. The pictures were quite expensive, and the negatives usually cost a small fortune, but most of the dames decided to buy. Particularly when they found

out that such photos, introduced as evidence in court, might hurt a wife's chances of getting alimony payments.

Joel didn't tell Yvette about Cono and the camera, of course. He just bought her a few drinks and made with the small-talk and told her about his big ranch out in the valley. Joel really didn't own a ranch, of course, and his only experience along that line came from the time he was on the Honor Farm at the State Penitentiary back home, but she didn't ask too many questions.

In fact, she didn't ask any questions at all. Not even when Joel made the suggestion about driving out to this little motel he knew about. She seemed to go for the idea right away, just as she seemed to go for Joel.

Actually, it might have been wiser if Joel had been the one who had asked a few questions—although there is some doubt that Yvette would have revealed her eager co-operation was based on the premise that it was *her* given task to study human biology, and the reproductive factor in particular.

But Joel, after a few drinks, wasn't inclined to make inquiries. Never look a gift horse in the mouth; not

when you have a beautiful filly like this one. And she *was* lovely, and she *did* cling to him, and when they got to the car she slid next to him on the seat and offered her lips and arms quite eagerly. Joel, despite his long experience and his long sideburns, found himself responding with unusual ardor and reacting with unusual anticipation.

Thus it was that he started the car in quite a hurry and drove out of town very fast, with Yvette in the seat beside him, her arms around him and her lips nibbling at his ear. Her nearness and the liquor and the speed were all mitigating factors, perhaps, as was the indecorous imagery which now filled Joel Francis with pleasurable euphoria.

But fast freights take no account of mitigating factors. And when Joel hit the railroad crossing on the outskirts of town, doing seventy, the fast freight loomed out of nowhere and hit him.

The next thing Joel Francis knew was the grinding, twisting sensation as the car compressed about him like a beer-can crushed by a giant hand. And like a beer-can, squeezed and emptied, it was flung into the darkness of a ditch.

One moment Joel was sitting there, speeding along without a care in the world, with this beautiful babe crawling all over him. The next minute he was lying in the overturned car, with the hood pinning his legs so he couldn't get free and crawl out.

At that he was pretty lucky, because the windshield had gone and the huge, jagged splinters of glass might have sliced his head clean off his body.

He closed his eyes and tried to wriggle loose, but he could not make it. He couldn't make it, but Yvette could. She was still at his side, and her legs hadn't been caught at all, so it was very easy for her to roll over and put her arms around him in a continuation of a loving embrace. She held him tightly; very tightly indeed.

So Joel wondered what the hell, had shock driven her screwy? Had she really flipped, did she think he was going to lie here in the wreck and make with the love bit? He tried to ease her off, but she wouldn't let go; she was awfully strong and in a minute she'd probably try to kiss him.

That's when Joel opened his eyes again and now there was enough light for him to see.

Enough light for him to realize that, whatever else she might be doing, she wouldn't be kissing him. Because the glass from the windshield had caught her, all right.

The thing making love to him didn't survive very long. Just long enough for him to see that it didn't have any head. Just long enough to drive Joel Francis mad.

Lawrence P. Dunlap hired her because she was the prettiest of the eighteen applicants for the job, and he kept her on because she was the smartest. Not just of the eighteen—but of all the women he had ever met.

Dunlap had met a lot of women in his time, too; but that time, for him, was long since past. Now he was only interested in making enough money to retire on, so he never attempted to inject the personal element in his relationship with Leona Cummings.

She started off as a good stenographer and became an excellent private secretary; just when she advanced to the role of indispensable assistant, Dunlap couldn't quite recall. It had surprised him to learn that she was a student of economics, with a particular interest in the stock mark-

et. This seemed a rather odd hobby for so charming a young lady, even though she was an orphan who lived alone in a room at the YWCA, without friends or social interests.

Still, Dunlap did not object. In fact, he came to the point where he encouraged her to discuss the ramifications of his own business, which was real estate.

At fifty, he prided himself on the accumulation of a modest fortune; his wife wore mink, his son drove a Lancia, and he himself was a non-athlete member of the Athletic Club and a non-farming member of the Country Club. He was thinking quite seriously of retiring pretty soon now.

At fifty-one, however, Lawrence P. Dunlap was not quite so self-assured. Casual conversations with Leona Cummings had convinced him he was missing several opportunities. She'd given him shrewd hints on various deals, current and pending, and offered him sound advice on future projects.

It was at her suggestion that he bought out a contracting firm in order to bid on an expressway program coming up that fall. It was due to her foresight that he managed to

acquire title to large blocs of land adjoining the proposed route. When his bid went through, Leona Cummings was instrumental in getting him to buy into the syndicate which formed to put up a huge shopping center in the new development.

Naturally, all this took money, and Dunlap had to mortgage his holdings. He spread himself pretty thin, but if everything went smoothly he'd have his money back in a year and then he could retire and watch the profits roll in.

Leona Cummings, meanwhile, was indispensable, as always. There were all sorts of delicate negotiations and arrangements to be made with aldermen, members of city planning commissions, union officials, and neighborhood politicians. Leona Cummings handled them as a go-between and his name was never connected with the exchange of cash for promises.

It was also fortunate that she was available to put in proxy bids for property, to head up the shrewdly-devised network of dummy corporations and holding companies which were necessary to establish if Dunlap didn't want his connections revealed. If it ever leaked out that he was

profiting from the building of the expressway, profiting from the sale of land adjoining it, and profiting from the leasing and resale of business property as a result of his other efforts, there might be embarrassing consequences down at City Hall and in the offices of the Collector of Internal Revenue. But with Leona Cummings as a front, there were neither leaks nor consequences. And a modest investment of a hundred thousand or so—spread judiciously through token corporate entities in order to establish credit for loans—made Dunlap a millionaire on his fifty-second birthday. He was ready to retire, now, and not to the ranchhouse he presently owned. He could build a mansion.

He felt so good about it that he paid Leona Cummings a Christmas bonus of over a thousand dollars, in cash, so she needn't declare it on her tax returns. She was properly grateful, too.

So grateful, in fact, that she came to him several days later with a further suggestion. A housing project was the ticket—a complete, multi-million-dollar venture with several thousand units. He owned the land, and the deal could be financed easily

enough. She had already taken the liberty of consulting Bert Harkin, their attorney.

At first, Dunlap demurred. "I've got enough money now," he said. "I'd like to quit. Isn't every man who can retire at fifty-two."

"Isn't every man who can be a multi-millionaire at fifty-three," Leona Cummings told him. "Just one more year."

And in one more year the project was almost completed. Leona was invaluable; she took most of the load off Dunlap's shoulders as the work progressed. Not only did she assume the job of fronting for the development corporation putting up the cracker-box units; she also took over the responsibilities in the promotional firm which was formed to handle sales and advertising of the houses to the general public.

The business boomed. Leona Cummings hadn't lied; at fifty-three, Dunlap was a multi-millionaire. Of course it was all on paper—his money was invested in the various corporate structures controlling the area. "But I can sell out for five or six million right now," he told her, the evening he handed her a three-thousand-dollar bonus as a token of his appreciation.

And that's just what I plan to do. Sell out and retire. Build me a place down in Florida and—”

“You can't,” Leona Cummings said. “The next few years will quadruple your holdings. Values are skyrocketing. Besides, there's talk of another expressway down on the South Side. Suppose you got in on that the same way. Why, you'd end up owning half the property in town! And that's not all—you'd own the property-owners, too! That's something I wanted to talk to you about, Mr. Dunlap. There's no reason why you shouldn't think about getting into politics. Oh, maybe you wouldn't care to run for office yourself, but you could groom a couple of bright young men. With the people you have in the areas you control, you could bring a lot of pressure to bear, swing a lot of votes. How'd you like to own this town, really own it, and everyone in it? Why—”

Dunlap was almost carried away by her argument. Almost, but not quite. He shook his head. “Maybe so,” he agreed. “I think it can be done. But I'm not going to do it. If I were ten years younger, perhaps, I'd be interested. Right now I just want to get out. I want you to call Harkin

for a meeting. I've got to arrange a gradual liquidation—”

Leona Cummings shook her head. “I've spoken to him. There's no need of a meeting. That is, if you insist on retiring.”

“Of course I insist. And I intend to liquidate.”

“You can't liquidate.”

“What do you mean?”

“You forget, Mr. Dunlap, that you're not the legal head of these businesses. I am.”

“But the voting stock—”

“Much of it is under my name, remember? And there's probably more than you think. You signed a lot of papers in the past few years. Harkin tells me you signed over practically everything.”

“What are you trying to tell me? Are you by any chance threatening to squeeze me out of my own business?”

“Of course not, Mr. Dunlap. You squeezed yourself out. You don't have a business any more. And all I'm telling you is that if you're set on retiring, you're perfectly free to do so, right now. You can walk out of this office this very minute without having to sign a thing.”

“Now see here, I'll have the law—”

“I think it would be better for you if you forgot about

the legal aspect. That's what Mr. Harkin said, after I showed him some of the papers you directed me to make out concerning a few little deals."

"This is blackmail, you can't get away with it! Turning me out of my own office."

"*My* office. *My* businesses." Leona Cummings smiled brightly and wrote out a check. "Here you are," she said. "A little retirement gift as a token of our association. Four thousand dollars. That's what you paid me in bonuses. I've saved the money, because I always intended to give it back to you. A sentimental gesture."

"But—"

"I wish you happiness in your retirement," Leona Cummings told him. "It's what you've always wanted, isn't it?"

So Lawrence P. Dunlap took the check. His own home was still mortgaged, and the four thousand dollars would not buy him a ranchhouse or a mansion, or a big place down in Florida. About all it did buy was liquor, during the next year. And on his fifty-fourth birthday, when he read in the papers about Leona Cummings and her new South Side housing project development, he found he

had just about enough money left to buy a second-hand revolver and some brand-new bullets.

Then Dunlap finally retired, to the family plot at the cemetery.

Clark Holton never knew where she came from and he didn't inquire.

There is no telling how many of them came during the early years: creatures like the one who called herself Margaret Kern.

A surname was hardly necessary, for in most instances —Margaret's included—marriage soon brought a new one.

She was Margaret Holton, now, his very own Margaret, six years married and the mother of a five-year-old girl named Peggy.

All of them who married, it seems, were monoparous, and all of them gave birth to perfectly normal-appearing, golden-haired little girls. Replicas of their nature.

Clark Holton was proud of his daughter and he adored his lovely wife. She was wise in those ways a man desires wisdom in a woman, and charmingly naive in others. Although he knew nothing about her background previous to their marriage, he was entirely content in the

present. Margaret saw to that.

If there was anything strange or disconcerting about his wife and child, Clark Holton remained totally unaware of it—at least, until too late. He never realized that Margaret's particular assignment was the study of human anatomy and physiology, or that she had given birth to Peggy merely to provide herself with a readily available assistant.

One night, in the cellar, he found out.

The next day Margaret was telling her neighbors that Clark Holton had gone away on a long business trip. In fact, he'd been transferred to the firm's Alabama plant, and while he got established and looked for a home down there, she intended to sell the house up here and then join him.

Calm and unruffled—and completely bathed after all that grimy wrestling with the furnace at midnight—precocious little Peggy played in the yard outside the window.

Margaret gazed fondly at her offspring as the neighbor lady beamed and gushed over the youngster.

"Why, she looks simply adorable," the neighbor lady cooed. "Just like you!"

Margaret acknowledged the

flattery, but even an Alien has some compunctions to be fair and truthful. So she glanced out at Peggy, who was squatting in the dust and playing marbles with the souvenirs she had insisted on retaining from last night's incident.

"Yes," Margaret replied. "She *does* resemble me. But she has her father's eyes."

Roy Hinchley realized that his couch was sagging and the leather was worn away by the squirmings of numberless neurotics and countless psychotics—but never, in all the years of his psychotherapeutic practice, had he ever entertained a patient like this one. Talk about paranoid delusions!

There was no need to, because the patient was doing all the talking.

"Don't ask me how I found out, Doctor, but I swear to you it's true."

"What's true?"

"There aren't any women left in the world any more."

The patient sat up. "That's why I came to you for help, Doctor. Not just because I need it myself, but because we all need it—all we men—now that the women are gone."

Roy Hinchley opened his

mouth, but the patient didn't wait for his reply. He continued to report.

"Sure, I know they *look* like women, and they even *act* like women—sometimes. But they are not, I tell you. They're invaders from another planet. That's the only possible answer."

"You see, they must have studied us first and figured out a logical method of conquest. No need to start a destructive war, once they figured out our own system of sexual relationships here on earth. All they had to do was marry us and take over. They saw how easy it was for our own earth-women to do just that; they've done it for generations, you know, as wives and mothers. So these creatures merely assumed female form and followed suit—with refinements and improvements of their own. They came down here and married all the best men, the key men, and pretty soon they'll be running everything, owning everything. Look at all the beautiful young widows of wealthy and prominent citizens who've become important factors in business and industry and government just in the last few years."

"Not all of these women are widows," Roy Hinchley said.

"Some of them aren't even married."

"That's true. They're too smart to follow just one pattern. Some of them infiltrated as spinsters, some of them play the role of the power behind the throne. But they're squeezing us out, more and more. They control eighty per cent of the buying power, most of the investments, and pretty soon they won't need men at all any more, even as fronts. I'll tell you something else I found out, too, Doctor—after I started studying this thing in earnest. Something's happening to the birth-rate."

"It's common knowledge, yes," Roy Hinchley admitted. "The birth-rate is declining, a bit."

"A bit? It's dropping fantastically. These creatures only seem to have one child. And have you noticed—it's always a female? I've written letters to Washington—"

Roy Hinchley repressed a sigh. Of course he'd written letters to Washington; these patients usually did. It was almost useless to attempt to reason with them, but one had to try.

"But there are over a billion women on earth. Surely you don't mean to imply that each and every one of them is an—outsider? Think of

your own relatives, your mother, your sister—”

“That’s just it, Doctor,” the patient murmured. “That is how I found out, you know. Because of my sister. She’s not my sister any more. Oh, she still *looks* like my sister, but she’s changed. She’s got a demon in her, one of those things from outer space. In the last six months she’s pushed me out of the family business, taking over everything for herself. It’s happening everywhere, Doctor. Naturally, there are only a few thousand who came here in assumed human form; who were able to marry and masquerade in that method. The others waited until they could profit by the knowledge of those who came first to spy and to learn. Now the rest are gradually infiltrating in a new way. They’re occupying the bodies of our *real* women, too. Displacing their personalities with other entities. That’s how the mass change-over is taking place.

“It’s happening everywhere, Doctor. And when a few men like myself begin to suspect the truth, they just seem to disappear. That’s why I came to you. You know something about the mind, the personality. You can warn people. they’ll listen to you.

“You’ve got to help me tell them. Tell them the earth is being conquered. Not on the battlefield, but in the boudoir. Tell them mankind is being—”

Dr. Roy Hinchley managed to get rid of his patient at last. The first step was to prescribe mild sedation. The second step, before he returned for another appointment, was to get in touch with this sister of his; find out something about the background of the situation. Maybe Clara would have some suggestions.

He closed his office for the day and prepared to mount the stairs to his second-floor apartment. Clara would be waiting for him there and he could tell her about this patient.

Up until recently, of course, he’d preserved a professional seal of silence concerning the confidences he heard, but lately Clara had begun to exhibit a profound interest in the nature of his work. Strange that she should suddenly become so fascinated after all these years. But then, she’d changed a great deal lately; developed an insight which was positively remarkable. And she’d taken to reading up on medicine and surgery, too.

(Continued on page 130)

# THE PICTURE

By  
JOHN BOLAND

*The master himself—O. Henry once wrote a story called "The Scent of Lavendar." It is now a classic and while this little yarn has an entirely different plot, its magic is closely akin to that produced by "...Lavendar."*

GOOD evening, sir. You'll be Mr. Martin, as answered my advert? Yes, I thought you would be. Come on in out of the cold. I'm Mrs. Smith. The room's on the third floor, at the back. I'll lead the way and you can follow. The stairs are a bit steep, but I don't suppose as that'll matter to a young man like you, will it?

I used to be able to get up and down a sight faster when I was younger, but I'm getting a bit past it now, you know. There's only just the one room up there, so it's nice and quiet for whoever has it. Ah! Now there's just this last flight. Mind your step at the corner. It's all right for me, I'm only a little 'un. But don't you bang your head.

Ah! Here we are. This is

the room. There. See for yourself. Nice, ain't it? Nice comfortable bed, nice electric fire, plenty of room to move around.

That's a nice big wardrobe, ain't it? Get all your clothing in there all right, couldn't you? There's a light-switch by the door, and another one by the side of the bed. If you like to read in bed at night, you don't have to get out on to a cold floor to switch the light off. Not that this room ever gets really cold, you know.

And now I'll show you something special. Come on over to the window. There, look at that! Wonderful view, ain't it! Yes, I knew you'd be surprised. There ain't a sign from the street that the water's so near. A stranger'd

walk along the street and never dream as there was a big reservoir at the back of these houses.

Biggest stretch of water in the city that is. The Lake, they call it. Mile and a quarter across it. Course, it don't look much now it's getting on for winter. But in the summer it's a treat to see the boats sailing on it. Oh, yes, proper sailing-boats. There's a club.

I tell you, when all the boats are out sailing, there isn't a prettier sight to be seen. All different colors they are, red, green, yellow, oh, they're ever so pretty! Both the gentlemen that've had this room used to sit and look out for hours.

Just wait a sec. I'll open the window. There. Now, if you lean out you can see the garden. Nice, ain't it.

'Course, there isn't much color left at this time of the year. But in the summer there's a lovely show of blooms. I reckon it's got something to do with being so near the Lake. You can see the water's only three or four yards from the end of the garden. In the summer one or two of my gentlemen climb over the fence at the bottom of the garden and go for a swim.

It's all right if you're a

good swimmer. But I always try to stop 'em. It isn't safe, Mr. Martin, and that's a fact. Oh, it looks all right, I'll grant you that. But it's treacherous . . . Real treacherous. Can you see that cutting running off to the right? That's where the overflow from the Lake goes. There's a big grating over the opening to the cutting. You can't see it, 'cause it's under the surface; but they put the grating there to stop branches and things being swept into the cutting and blocking it.

You can imagine what sort of an undercurrent there is. And when I tell you there's over ten foot of water there, only a yard out from the bank, you can see why I said it's dangerous.

But in the summer it's really beautiful.

Right. I'll close the window, if you don't mind. The weather's getting very damp and chilly, and I don't like to get the room damp. Not that I've had much trouble. There's only just one little spot of damp on the wall. Over there, it is, this side of the wardrobe.

Anybody else would have covered it up, but I don't do things like that. I like to be open and above-board. 'Course, I shouldn't leave it like that if you take the room.

I'd put something over it. You can see there's a nail in the wall, just over the patch. I stick a picture there, but I didn't want to hide the damp before I told you about it. I never believe in hiding things. It doesn't pay. Besides, people find out just the same.

By the way, I hope you ain't superstitious? I thought I'd ask, because some of my other gentlemen might try to pull your leg, if you decide to stay. I've got one or two real lads, I can tell you. Mind you there's nothing wrong with 'em, they're perfect gentlemen. But they do like a joke. And they might pull your leg if you come here.

Oh, there's nothing wrong with the *room*, you understand. It's just that I've had a bit of bad luck with the last young man that had it. Come to that, I've been unlucky with the last two as had the room. The first one was old Mr. Trent. Oh, he was a perfect gentleman. Retired. Been in a bank out East, somewhere. Lived abroad most of his life. Then he came here. Spent all his time at that window, he did. Used to paint pictures of the Lake.

I don't know how many pictures he painted while he was here, but I found a couple

of dozen, all of the Lake, after he died. Yes, he died. Pneumonia. Went out without his coat one day, when the police were dragging the Lake for a kiddie that had been drowned.

Honestly, the kids round here are little devils! Won't do as they're told. The police must have had fifty notices put up, telling everybody that it's dangerous to bathe. But the kids won't pay any attention. The notices don't stay up an hour before the kids pull 'em down. And of course, someone's always getting drowned.

I tell you, the kids are proper devils! They've got no respect for anybody. Not that they'd trouble you up here, sir. You wouldn't hardly be able to hear them from up here, whatever noise they make.

But I was telling you about Mr. Trent. Well, he went out one day without his coat, to watch the police. The police always drag this part of the Lake when someone's been drowned. There's a current that brings the bodies towards that grating I told you about. Well, Mr. Trent stayed out there watching the police for such a long time that he was properly chilled when he came indoors.

'Course, a gentleman like him, who'd spent most of his life in the tropics, he felt the cold more than you or me would. Couple of days later he was in bed with a cold, and I sent for the doctor. He packed the old gentleman off to hospital, but it wasn't any good. Mr. Trent died a couple of days later.

But there. That's the way it goes. In the midst of life we are in death. Such a nice man, Mr. Trent was. Spent all his time by that window, painting. It was just after he died as that damp patch came on the wall. Funny thing, that was. One day it wasn't there. Next day it looked as though it had been there for years.

I used one of old Mr. Trent's pictures to cover it up when I let the room again. After the old man died on my hands, so to speak. . . . Not that he died in this room, you understand, there's nothing like that about *this* room. . . . I reckoned I wouldn't take another old person. Thought I'd go for someone younger. So I took a young man in, a chap at the university he was, studying for his exams. Poor lad! I can remember the day he came here as though it was yesterday.

I was standing here, talk-

ing to him just like I'm talking to you. He wanted a place where he could get on with his studies. So long as it was quiet, that was all he asked. Oh, as nice a lad as you could wish to meet. Norton, his name was. Studying to be a lawyer, or something. There were books all over the room. Couldn't move for them you couldn't.

Well, he soon settled in, happy as could be. He put some of his own photographs on the wall, and I gave him one of old Mr. Trent's paintings to hang over the damp patch. Lovely picture it was. Three kids swimming in the Lake. Just the right size to cover the patch, and Mr. Norton quite liked it. Said that it was a very powerful picture, or something like that. I couldn't see what he meant myself, but some of these university lads get all sorts of queer notions, don't they? I mean, you've only got to look at the way some of 'em get themselves up. I reckon some of 'em look a proper scream.

Well, we were all happy, then one day a kid got himself drowned in the Lake. Oh, it did upset Mr. Norton. He looked terrible. Stayed at the window all night, watching the police work. They use big lamps at night, you know. Not

that they make a nuisance of themselves, you understand. You would hardly hear them from up in this room. They're very quiet.

But Mr. Norton was so upset!

Then one morning, about a month later, I met him as he was coming down to breakfast. Looked like a ghost, he did. As though he hadn't had a wink of sleep. Acted queer too. Came right up to me and said: "There'll be a child drowned in the Lake today, Mrs. Smith."

'Course, I thought he was pulling my leg. "That's very interesting, Mr. Norton," I said. "How do you know?"

Then he said something real funny. "There were three in the picture when you first put it there," he said. "And yesterday there were two. Now there's only one left."

'Course, I laughed. But you know, sir, I never had such a shock in all my life as I did later that morning. I was up in this very room, making Mr. Norton's bed, when I heard some shouting going on outside. I looked out of the window, and there was the police, dragging.

I tell you, it made me feel real queer. There was Mr. Norton telling me as there'd be a kid drowned in the Lake

that very day; and he'd been right! Coincidence, of course, but it made me feel funny for a bit, I don't mind telling you.

I was going to tackle Mr. Norton about it that evening, before supper. But he didn't come in till very late, and I didn't see him. In fact, I never saw him alive again. No. The poor lad drowned himself in the Lake. Terrible tragedy it was, him being so young.

--They reckoned at the inquest that he'd been studying too hard, poor lad. He left a note behind, but it didn't make sense. It said something about there being only one left in the picture, and that he was going to save him.

Oh, proper cracked, he must have been, poor lad. Ah, yes, and there was something else. Before he went out and chucked himself into the water, he'd done something else funny. He'd burned old Mr. Trent's painting in the grate. Yes, he did. Burned it to a cinder. Oh, he must have been right out of his mind. Such a pity.

Ah, well, it takes all sorts to make a world, doesn't it.

But you'll see why I told you the story, Mr. Martin. I wouldn't want you to get it all twisted from any of my other gentlemen, if you decid-

ed to take the room. They might pull your leg in all sorts of ways.

Well, sir, what do you say? Do you think you'll take the room? Good. Now don't you bother about that damp patch. As soon as you move in I'll

cover it up. I've got another one of Mr. Trent's drawings that's just the right size. Ever such a nice painting it is. A winter scene of the Lake it is, with three lads skating on the ice.

THE END



"Let's face it, Mrs. Gilson. You're a hypochondriac."

# *Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night*

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

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*We doubt if the real television people will ever go as far as the fictional ones in this story. But if they do—Wow!*

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## *The Altar*

GARY watched the telemathy tech make the final adjustments on the portable transmitter. The steel-encased machine, with its crystalline absorber hovering over it like a disembodied eye, made the room seem cramped, and Gary couldn't help wondering how the small apartment could possibly accommodate all the guests who would be coming to visit the following night, even though he knew that the guests wouldn't be there physically—that the apartment, in a telemorphic sense, was large enough to accommodate the whole world.

Judy was watching the tech, too. Her hazel eyes were still wide from the shock of learning that the TE Programs De-

partment had named her and Gary as the next "Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night." It was hard to believe, Gary conceded, especially when you considered the increasing number of newly married couples daily matriculating from the adolescence academies and the corresponding increase in the eligibility list.

The tech was tall and capable, and his neat gray tech-suit emphasized both qualities. His long, aristocratic fingers played adroitly over the intricate mass of tubes and wires, adjusting here, tightening there, chording a complex melody that only he could hear.

Gary cleared his throat. "Just what will we have to do?" he asked.

"Mr. Llewelyn will be

around to brief you this evening," the tech said.

"I know, but you must have some idea."

"Well, as nearly as I understand it, all you're supposed to do is what you'd ordinarily do on any other Saturday night. Just be yourselves. That's what it amounts to."

Judy laughed nervously. "Sounds easy enough," she said. "But think of all those people tuning in!"

"Yes, just think of them!" said Gary.

"You're not supposed to think of them." The tech inserted a long screwdriver into the bowels of the transmitter, plied it deftly. "That's why we install our equipment a day ahead of time—to give you a chance to accustom yourselves to it... Say, from the way you two talk, you'd think you didn't *want* to be hosts!"

"Oh, we *want* to be, all right," Judy said quickly. "We—we just haven't got used to the idea yet."

"About Paradise Isle—" Gary said, "—is it really as lovely as they say it is?"

The tech gave the screwdriver a final turn, withdrew it and slipped it into the inside pocket of his coat. He fitted the cover of the transmitter into place and locked it, then turned and regarded Gary

obliquely. "You'd be surprised at the number of things they don't tell a t-tech—and Paradise Isle is number one on the list . . . Why don't you drop me a line after you get there and tell *me* whether it's lovely or not?"

"All right," Gary said. "We will."

"I'll bet you will!" The tech closed his calfskin toolbag. "You'll forget me and all the rest of the world, just like all the others. Too good for us." He picked up the toolbag and started for the door.

"Don't be bitter," Judy said. "Maybe someday *you'll* be chosen."

The tech paused in the doorway, shook his head. "Not much chance of that. My wife and I are both close to the ineligibility age. First thing you know, we'll be old enough to buy a TE set and become participants ourselves. In a way, though, I'm more glad than bitter. I've always wondered what participation would be like—and why the participants keep it such a deep, dark secret."

"I've always wondered what being 'Mr. Saturday Night' would be like," Gary said.

"Or 'Mrs. Saturday Night,'" said Judy.

"Looks like both of you are

going to find out," the tech said . . . "Happy hosting!"

### *The High Priests*

"I don't care what you say," Penstetter said, finishing his *apéritif* and setting the empty glass down on the damask tablecloth. "I still wish I was engaged in a different profession."

Holden cut a small square of tenderloin, rare, and raised it to his mouth. He chewed reflectively. Presently: "You're too nostalgic, Ben. Next thing you know, you'll be telling me that people should raise their own children, instead of consigning them to puberty and adolescence institutions — or that wives should stay home, instead of working . . . What better, what higher, profession is there than the art of entertaining the masses? And in our case, with the government sponsoring our program, what more lucrative—or secure—profession is there?"

"How'd you like it if *you* and *your* wife were chosen?"

"My wife and I can't be chosen, any more than you and yours can. It's been a long time since any of us has seen 25. You took your chances and so did I—though perhaps we weren't aware of it at the time. But the odds have al-

ways been good, and today they're better yet. You can't deny that the lottery system is fair—though why I'm trying to convince you of all this is beyond me. You can quit any time you like."

"After a thorough brain-wash. No thanks."

"Listen," Holden said, breaking his hardroll and buttering it evenly, "you're new in this business, and I'm going to tell you something. We're living in a Utopia right now, only diehards like yourself are too obtuse to realize it—or too stubborn to admit it. When was the last marital murder committed in this country? Why, you can't even remember, it was so long ago! And what happened to the overwhelming divorce rate of the mid-twentieth century? How many divorces have we had during the last hundred years? How many annulments? Hell, you can count them on the fingers of one hand!"

"You make me sick," Penstetter said.

"But not half as sick as you'd be without 'Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night' coming your way every weekend. The trouble with you, Ben, is that you won't face a simple truth. It's an essential truth which our society evaded for cen-

turies. It took a new medium like telepathy to snap us back to reality, and a program like 'Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night' to supply the means. Do you know what that truth is, Ben?"

"I don't want to know."

"It lies behind every piece of fiction ever written," Holden said; "every play ever produced, every movie ever made, every telepathic drama ever telepathed. It originates in the simple fact that the average individual living in a complex society is dissatisfied both with himself and with his existence, and needs periodically to escape from the boredom of being himself and the boredom of living his humdrum life—*by becoming someone else*. If he can do so often enough, the psychoses that afflict all mechanistic civilizations will disappear.

"Neither the written nor the spoken word was strong enough to create a satisfactory illusion. Visual images helped, but they too failed, because they had to be distilled through the intellect. Identification was always spotty—till telepathy came along. During telepathic identification you don't *read* about someone else, you don't *see* someone else; you *become*

someone else. And thanks to 'Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night', once each week every married couple in the country, past the eligibility age, can go into another married couple's home, share their thoughts, see through their eyes, feel with them, suffer with them, be happy, sad, elated with them. What more can you ask of a program, Ben?"

"Mercy," Penstetter said.

Holden's knife slipped from his fingers, clattered against his plate. But he retrieved it casually, did not even raise his voice when he spoke his next words: "And mercy is precisely what we dispense, Ben. Mercy to the many. And the many are what count, in any civilization."

"The many are the mass," Penstetter said, "and the mass is a monster—an entity with an atomic pile for a god and an electrical circuit for a soul. God bless our Heinous Home . . . Let's have another drink. I've lost my appetite."

### The Lambs

"Well," Mr. Llewelyn said, taking off his hat and stepping into the apartment, "how does it feel to be the new 'Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night'?"

"We're still a little nervous," Gary said.

"Now there isn't a thing to be nervous about." Mr. Llewelyn was a small, sixtyish man with peaked features and faded blond hair. "All you have to do is act yourselves. What do you usually do on Saturday night?"

"Oh, we read a little sometimes," Judy said. "Make popcorn. Talk."

"Fine! Everybody'll love that. A nice homey evening by the fireside, so to speak. All of the wives will identify with you, Judy, and Gary, of course, will be host for the husbands."

"Then that's all we have to do?" Gary asked. "Read, make popcorn, and talk?"

"That's the ticket," Mr. Llewelyn said. "Just be yourselves. Act natural. Think whatever comes into your mind . . . Oh yes—" He reached into the inside pocket of his coat and withdrew a folded sheet of paper. "—this is your contract. Just sign your names where I've put the little x's." He indicated the two blank lines at the bottom of the page and handed Gary a fountain pen.

"I—I never figured on a contract," Gary said.

"Why certainly there's a contract. Who ever heard of anybody appearing on TE without signing a contract!"

"But this is for only one

night. We're not really TE stars."

"As 'Mr. and Mrs. Saturday Night' you'll be the biggest TE stars in the country!" Despite his bantering tone of voice, Mr. Llewelyn betrayed symptoms of impatience. His right eyelid kept twitching every now and then, and he kept wiping his mouth — as though his words didn't taste just right. "All it says," he went on, "is that we — the owners of the program—agree to transport both of you to Paradise Isle and to maintain you in luxury for the rest of your lives, in return for your appearing for one hour on our show; and that you, Judy, and you, Gary, agree to accept your life-long vacations on Paradise Isle as full payment for your services. Fair enough?"

"I guess so." Gary signed his name and handed the contract to Judy.

"What's Paradise Isle like?" Judy asked, affixing her signature and returning the contract to Mr. Llewelyn.

"Never having been there, I'm not qualified to tell you," Mr. Llewelyn said. "But you'll find out for yourselves soon enough—right after the program, in fact. Your escort will be waiting for you just outside the door, and there'll be

a chartered jet at the airport, ready to whisk you away to the land of dreams!" He wiped his mouth. "So you'd better get all your things packed—if you haven't already—and be all set to go!"

"We're all set now," Gary said.

"Fine!" Mr. Llewelyn went over to the transmitter, checked the lock on the cover, glanced cursorily at the crystalline absorber. "Everything seems to be shipshape, so I guess I'll be getting back to the studio. Till 9:30 tomorrow night, then!"

"How—how will we know when we're on?" Judy asked.

"Oh, you'll just *know*," Mr. Llewelyn said, putting on his hat and opening the door. He wiped his mouth again, and his eyelid jitterbugged furiously. "Don't worry about *that!*"

### The Entity

The Entity quivered into slow wakefulness. The million windows of its country-wide habitat turned gray, then pink, and presently the sun poured forth its brilliance over the land, and the Entity began arising from its million beds and stretching its million arms and yawning with its million mouths. It cooked and

consumed its million breakfasts and departed for its million occupations. It shuffled heaved wrote typed laughed cried lifted turned talked loved hated received gave won lost ate lunch and shuffled heaved wrote typed laughed cried lifted turned talked loved hated received gave won lost and returned to its million lairs and its million frustrations and ate its million dinners of steak and roast beef and fish and shrimp and pork chops and sat down before its million TE sets to partake.

It was Saturday night.

### The Sacrifice

"Feel anything yet?" Gary asked.

"Not a thing," Judy said. "Maybe we're not on yet."

"Oh, we're on all right." He glanced at his watch. "It's 9:35 . . . Say, I felt something then!"

"So did I."

"Like — like something crawling in my brain. Like—"

Judy got up from the couch. "I'll make some popcorn."

"Swell!"

He watched her walk through the archway into the kitchen, absently noting the turn of her calves, the rhythmic motion of her hips. The most natural thought in the

world crossed his mind, only somehow it didn't seem natural now, it seemed obscene. Abruptly he remembered the way older people had sometimes eyed him on the street, the way they had sometimes eyed Judy . . . like someone sizing up a chuck roast or a melon or a basket of tomatoes, and on the heels of that memory came another, older, memory, and he relived the time in puberty school when the Principal had called all the boys into the gymnasium and there had been this little doctor waiting there, looking ironically like a satyr with his iron-gray hair and his iron-gray goatee, who'd shouted sex at them for an hour, threatening them, reviling them, condemning them . . . and he had stood there, sick to his stomach, revolted by the obscene things the little goat-man was saying, resolving never again to look at another girl—

He got up from the couch, choking back the memory. He could feel the Entity in his mind, and it was like a worm crawling through his secrets, digging into his past, feeding on his frustrations and his fears, probing for perversions, for infidelities, for food of any kind . . .

Judy's face was pale when

he entered the kitchen. She had emptied a can of popcorn kernels into the electric popper and they were just beginning to sputter in the melted grease. He got a bottle of beer out of the refrigerator and opened it with trembling fingers. Concentrate on what you're doing, he told himself. Concentrate on the present, concentrate on this very moment and forget there was ever any other. But it wasn't any good, and presently another memory bubbled to the surface of his consciousness, and he climbed the tree that grew between the girls' and the boys' dormitories and looked down from his leafy bower into the second floor room where the two girls were undressing, watching with fascination and with horror, all the while hearing the imprecations of the goat-man echoing in the back of his mind.

He looked at Judy again, and her face frightened him. She had forgotten to cover the popper and the popcorn was jumping out like grotesque flakes of snow and falling crazily all over the table and tumbling to the floor. She stood there like a frightened fairy princess, bereft of wand and magic . . . Abruptly he returned to the moment in the

academy gym where the inter-institution dance had taken place and he waited again, just inside the entrance, thinking of all the other get-acquainted dances he'd attended, thinking of the two extra years he'd been forced to remain in the adolescence academy because he'd refused to take a wife . . . and then seeing the girl walking towards him across the floor, the gentle dream of a girl in a pink cloud of a dress, and knowing suddenly that with her it would be different, that with her it would be all right . . . the girl, Judy, the same Judy standing beside him now, in the merciless brightness of the kitchen, in the merciless grip of the Entity—

"I feel naked, Gary. Help me, please!"

The transmitter, Gary thought. He got a hammer out of the utility closet and ran into the living room and began pounding on the crystalline absorber. But the absorber refused to shatter or fall, and finally he hurled the hammer to the floor and began tugging on the lead-in cable, trying to pull it free from its fastenings. Judy joined him, and they pulled together; but the cable wouldn't budge, and when they tried to open the door, that wouldn't budge

either; and then they heard the voices in the corridor, the voices of their escort, and they realized that even if the door did open, there was no escape for them, would be no escape till the blood of their intimacy had ceased to flow, till the last drops of their private moments and their cherished secrets had oozed from their minds, and their marriage lay dead at their feet.

Suddenly Gary became aware that he was staring at the bedroom door. Judy was staring at it, too. He tried to look away, but his eyes would not obey him. They weren't his eyes any more: they were the Entity's eyes now, just as his body and soul were the Entity's; just as Judy's eyes and Judy's body and soul were the Entity's—

And Paradise Isle had nothing to do with paradise: it was a euphemism for asylum—the asylum to which you were consigned after you had shared your wife—or your husband—with the world . . .

They ran to each other like frightened children and held each other close . . . and felt the first surge of vicarious desire within them—of lust and fear and frustration, of need and want and lechery—as the Entity closed in for the kill.

THE END

FANTASTIC

# INTERMISSION

By E. K. JARVIS

*One expects drama on the screen in a movie house. But sometimes the real drama sits in the audience and watches.*

THE warning for intermission burned across the screen suddenly, preluding the vacuum between features. Erwin Penning watched the frenzied orgiastic review of animated candies — popcorn flinging itself from heat, soft drinks bubbling over into the gaping mouths of children who smiled out at the restless audience.

The stagelights flared on as he permitted himself the faint humor. Penning looked away from the after image that remained as the curtains closed. He was unable, without the strength of the picture before him, to keep out the detached impressions of reality. It was like a marsh filling in after a rain, his mind swelling with the familiar while Penning himself sat still as death. In the periphery of his weary vision, people moved up towards the lobby or back to gain a seat farther from the screen. Some of them, milling,

making sounds again, seemed real yet to Penning.

A moment before he had been watching shadows on the screen, feeling six feet tall and handsome in the darkness about him. The familiar heaviness, half popcorn, half spent emotion, lay deep inside him, vaguely stirring in the shell of body that had forgotten to breathe properly during the climax of the movie's action. Penning wanted to stay and him, to keep out the detached see the feature again, but there were reasons against it. . . .

He felt a sudden savage distaste for the mass of life around him, the *feel* of it, the smell of it in the close warmth. It was strange but comfortable to forget them so effortlessly during the picture. Now they were *here* and he was not certain about remaining. He hated the music that began to blare at him from a hidden

speaker offstage. There was no way to get INSIDE that kind of music. It said nothing that had not been said in the undying stupid cuckhold theme that saturated the ballads on the juke boxes.

That wasn't illusion at all. That was real.

Well, now he wouldn't stay to see the picture again, he decided. Penning took his trench coat, held so carefully during the movie, and draped it over his forearm. He began, with a shrinking sensation each time a point of his body touched a protuberance of another body, the halting move towards the clearing aisle. Once there, he moved quickly to the main exit and out into the night air that too, smelled of humanity. He should be home, Penning reflected. He had gone to the movies straight from work, without dinner and the baiting that was served with most dinners as he sat across the small table from his mother.

Mother. No single thought quite like that thought.

*M is for the million words that sap me.*

Penning began the walk home from the neighborhood theatre. He could not save the feeling of being the man he had watched on the screen.

Outside, he became aware of himself again; didn't like it. Penning was at 37, remarkably undistinguished. Plain, plain, he thought. A man of medium features and nothing more. He was neat, at least, having learned good dress in his work as a clerk in a clothing store. But neatness was drabness and it didn't do much for him. There was nothing dominant enough to impart character, save the inner radiance that had shown in the movie. That was fading now in the harsh light of store fronts. He was a kind of invisible man without brief, one among the countless that the city seemed best able to produce.

He felt inquisitive wind on his bald spot and brought his hat up quickly. There had been a time when his hair was thick and curly, almost a crown. He had brushed it and kept it clean then, tending its growth and still it had dropped out and aged him.

The hat covered and enclosed. He thought:

*Il met son chapeau sur sa tête.*

There had been hope then, when his hair had symbolized youth. Things I did, he remembered . . . things I did to secure horizons for my future years . . . my old age after 35.

Such as the French lessons at a vocational evening class. Ten years ago with the war that had passed him by. French lessons, a Dale Carnegie course shortly after the peace began, many resolutions upon the new year, change of deodorant, even a few hesitant hopeful contacts with utter strangers of both sexes in the endless city.

Remnants now. Still around but too small to be patched with anything else. French and other lessons, self taught. Hope then . . . with each review of the draft board. No . . . war was not for Erwin Penning.

So find your own compensations. At age 37. Yes, try and find it.

The night was too warm for the trench coat and he knew that. But it was after all, his pride. Yeah, and his cloak. With it, he was a reporter or a detective, moving with purpose towards . . . well, towards something.

Is this Walter Mitty? He pondered uneasily. Am I the man who would die from one glass of cold water and one hot—

No, no. There must be hope. Somewhere, anywhere, I am only a statistic. True. God and His staff of actuaries. They know that at 37 I have

not yet achieved achievement. But there is time. . . .

Penning was driven by his thoughts, moving past the faces of the city, wishing the wind that pushed him might come stronger so he could turn up the collar and hunch into the trench coat. How can they know what I am? With all their tables and dry statistics. I don't know me. No one does, least of all say, my Mother.

*O is for the other times she cries.*

His mother had never approved the trench coat. She had insisted at first he return it, then lectured him because he didn't buy it at his own store where he was allowed an employee discount. But of course, his store did not handle surplus trench coats. They were hard enough to find but what point to argue with her? Mother, Mother, he thought. I mustn't go against her wishes. But the coat . . . the naked symbol of the coat, had won out. In everything else she had her way. He reflected this without malice. It had always been so. She had made him frail and what he was and it was wrong to bait her but the coat had won out. It was important in a way she would never understand.

His coat now. Penning longed to soil it in battle but never would. He cared for the coat as he had cared for his curly hair . . . as she cared for her flowers. He tended it and all his private dreams. Mitty was lucky. . . . Mitty had James Thurber. He had no one and it was hard to tend the dreams in the barren soil of his days.

Penning was thus between mental settings as he reached a curb and crossed with the green light. At times, he liked to imagine that he could make the lights change colors by mental force alone, the psycho-kinesis complex. The best he could achieve was a rare coincidence at these same traffic lights. But not now. The now sense jerked him straighter halfway across as he became aware of a big car rushing down upon him. Penning froze for an instant, nostrils flared to new danger, reaching down on the side hidden from the car and driver to brush the imagined bulk of an automatic. Danger was a runaway laugh deep inside him until the car slowed and stopped.

The old man behind the wheel never glanced at him at all.

It could have been, Penning wished. Another time and world. Without undue em-

barrassment, he thought: I could have made it by rolling to the curb side and shooting for the tires. Have to watch the innocents though. . . . Hell to have some bug-eyed bystander catch a slug meant for him.

Yeah bo, hell.

Across and following the sidewalk again, his step was lighter as he ruminated on the deep cough of gunfire in the glass cage of city about him. To be real, of course, anyone getting hit by a bullet would have to slam back from the impact. He had read somewhere that they had done that in "Shane." They had tied a wire to a man and jerked him back as a bullet might have moved him. The trend towards reality was good to savor, he thought. Like tonight. Having a gunfighter showing real fear. Yeah, that trend was good to savor. In an unreal world.

Bullets going into flesh make small round holes, he knew. Coming out . . . coming out . . . when will they show the bullets coming out. He had found a book about it in the library, a police book on gunshot wounds. Soft-nosed, dum-dums, shrapnel. Thinking out the pantomime impact of bullets tearing into his steel-hard

flesh, Penning accidentally conjured his own image as it looked in his bedroom mirror, standing naked after a bath. The flesh was pale and soft. Above his body, the disturbed face reflected guilt at the nakedness.

Cry baby bitty. Think like Walter Mitty.

Oh, there was time to do the things he would do. When it came to pass, if he recalled the present at all it would be laugh in reflection. Just once, he wanted to climb the stairs, creaky with dry rot, and say something important to his Mother.

"Mother, a friend has a Bristol sloop moored at San Diego. She's weather rigged and I'm going to crew on it when it pulls out next Monday. Out to Pearl Harbor and on to the Marquesas."

Pearl Harbor was west and the Marquesas . . . they were, well, to the south somewhere . . . somewhere . . .

*T is for the tears she shed to trap me.*

Such things happened to someone at least. He looked at his watch but reckoned time as correctly by his passage along a known street. It was 8:30. He could well have stayed and seen the Western again even though it was

never as good the second time.

Even though it was all happening to someone else and to no one at all.

Events did happen, of course. Once in spring, two years ago, they had stopped him on the subway platform to check his identity. Two plainclothes policemen, one part bigness, one part assurance, waiting in silence while he fumbled with his wallet and the proof that he was not the criminal they were hunting. He was alarmed at first, deliciously shocked by their attention, then dejected and embarrassed because he was Erwin Penning after all and they were neither relieved or disturbed by that. In fact they were totally unimpressed.

For weeks after he had seen the subway in a new light, resolving at last the desire to wear a trench coat even though the two men wore dark business suits and plain topcoats. So he wasn't the man they were after. They would not have caught HIM that easily, not in the long coffin with exits that would one day close down on the dirty trains and the horrible mob. For weeks he watched for other of the breed, but nothing like the detectives happened again.

He should not even have mentioned it at work.

At the clothing store where he worked, the others laughed about it and forgot it too soon. Penning understood that the store was no place for his daydreams. He hated it for that, the sameness of clothes on racks, the smell of feet when he brought shoes for customers to try, the indecision of customers who could never decide decently because they could not really afford to spend. He accorded it a mild hate, a euphemistic manner because he needed the store and they asked only attentiveness and subservience to the greater whole.

The hours of his working day were not too long a time between realities.

He quit the store each day well able to pick up the thread of sterile excitement. He was careful to buy his magazines in a different neighborhood, a type of sex literature that aroused but did not consume energy. Penning had quite a collection of back issues at home. He shouldn't feel guilt about the private pornography. It was HIS apartment, damn her anyway.

*H is for the hope that slowly dies.*

The magazines were kept

hidden in a locked chest in his closet. Now that the walk home was almost ended, he felt dim fear that his mother might have found the hidden key at last and uncovered his treasure. She was always poking about and she always knew when he was coming up the stairs.

It was now 8:45. Penning stood outside the apartment, holding off the climb, hoping in the last look he gave the street that he would see the beginning of adventure. Anything to carry him away from here. The wind that had followed him home was playing at his feet like a kitten, moving papers in the gutter. It turned on him suddenly, stinging his eyes with a fine spray of sifting decay, deciding for him the course of another night at home.

He went inside and began to climb the stairs.

Maybe tomorrow . . . tomorrow night. Something to happen to me. How wonderful to walk from the store or this place and run until the dock gates stopped him. For a moment he could feel the throb of engines beneath steel deck, louder than the shouting of farewells.

Southhampton. Europe. Cunard Lines, Grace Lines, Kungsholm.

Were they real after all?

He thought about it, letting it gnaw at the corners of his unrest, making his feet heavy as lead as he reached the apartment and went inside. His mother was waiting for him.

*E is for her eyes upon the neighbors.*

Waiting to pounce and eat us alive, he thought. Is there cartilage between us? A growth that keeps me with this woman stranger? There was some vague bondage but he never thought of it if he could avoid it. He never thought of it and his Mother in contrast, thought of nothing else.

"Erwin?" She called as he stood inside the door. He wanted to say no, to match the asinine question with a like answer. He answered. Yes, it was Erwin.

"Hang your coat up, dearest," she said. "Don't leave your hat on the table."

"All right, Mother." There was something else in her voice, he decided. Some bone being worried and not yet sucked clean of marrow. She would be reading in her room, protruding here and there from her housecoat, thin milk legs, bony hands, no lips beyond a thin slit hung in other

wrinkles. She was dried up and dried out and he was going to be just like her. They were too much alike, too much he thought in panic.

Penning shut his eyes to the apartment, analyzing the odors of each room:

"There's fresh cake and milk if you're hungry." She crept out of her own dream world long enough to link a few stray thoughts. "You went to the movies I suppose. And without dinner. I wish you would at least call me when you're going to do that."

"I know, I know." He opened his eyes and it was the same. Her voice edged into the room as he shed his coat. It would ask and get louder as soon as it had judged his reaction.

"Erwin?"

There was a long pause in which he did not admit to her existence.

"Erwin. I found what you were *reading*. I found that BOOK on your bed."

Oh, God, in Thy infinite— He groaned aloud, remembering now that he had left the magazine because he had been in a hurry to make his bed. All day he had sensed something out of place. That damned picture magazine with its beautiful heavy

breasts and bare flesh, the long thighs closed and the red lips open on white teeth. And the printing just enough off register to spoil his need for perfection.

"Erwin, I don't think you should . . . read those kind of . . ." Her voice turned shrill and faded.

He was certain she hadn't thought out what she wanted to say. There was a dead time called January, 1930, when his father had put a gun muzzle into his mouth and blown away all the regrets of the crash, but she had stopped living, too, in a sense. And she had worked to support her son so now he worked to support her. They were together and the rest of it was too far back to change or understand. . . .

"If your father was living . . ." She always said that.

*R is round, and round the wheels do go.*

"All right, all right," he shouted. The neighbors would hear and he didn't care. I hate it, he screamed in silence. All of it because there was no way to separate what might have been from what was.

Yes, yes. If his father was living . . . Or if his mother was dead. Would she struggle if I choked her?

Would color come into her face at last, music into her voice if he smashed the screams back into the slack throat?

*Put them all together they spell murder.*

Penning divorced his silent thoughts from the apartment for another moment, wishing it all away as he sometimes wished the change of stop lights. I hate all of it, he screamed again in silent penance.

Because it was of his own choosing.

Then he found the cake and milk and sat at the table. He began to eat ravenously, trying to fill a small corner of a great void that came back upon him. He hurried to finish the meal so he could go into his bedroom and sit in the darkness awhile. Perhaps he would find interest in the day-dream he had invented about the knight who stole the princess, or the first rocket flight to the moon. . . .

Perhaps, but sometimes he tired of them and no new ones had come along that weren't like all the rest. At least the movies will change tomorrow, he thought in dull anticipation.

*I should have stayed and seen the second show.*

THE END

FANTASTIC

# THE SAVAGE MACHINE

By RANDALL GARRETT

ILLUSTRATOR SCHOENHERR

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*The conqueror of the future—the man with a dictator complex—may find the stationary computor of more value than guns and mobile missiles.*

---

MONTROSE had decided to kill me, and there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it.

Yeah, Montrose. F. Hamilton Montrose. I know; you never heard of him. Neither have most people. Frankly, neither had I until a couple of weeks ago. The first thing I knew about the ubiquitous power of Montrose was the night a man by the name of Kraus forced his way into my apartment with a gun in his hand.

I was sitting in my chair—my favorite, big, fat automatic relaxer—reading an old copy of Sir Robert Agmont's classic English police story, *Bobby's Burden*, and sipping happily at a gin rickey. I was alone; I'd carefully checked my guard robot mechanisms

before I came into my apartment to make sure that no one had sneaked in in my absence—a City Councilman can't be too careful. I knew damned well that there was no one in that apartment but me.

So you can see why I spilled the gin rickey all over my book when a quiet voice said: "Councilman."

I jerked my head up. He was a little man, about five-six; dark-haired, with a thin, intelligent face. He didn't look like a bum or a small-time thief; he was well-dressed and freshly shaven. But in his right hand, he carried a 5 mm. Von Hindemuth Magnum automatic.

"Don't do anything rash, Councilman Lieth," he said. "I'm a desperate man."

His voice was calm as he

said it, but I had a feeling that the tension in his voice indicated the desperation he was talking about.

"Next time you don't want a man to do anything rash," I told him, "don't scare hell out of him the first thing."

"Sorry, Councilman, I—"

"Sorry, hell!" I'd recovered from my shock and was getting mad. "Look at this! My Agmont is a mess!" Fortunately, I'd had the book plasticized; the drink wouldn't really hurt it.

"Councilman, I really am sorry," the guy said—and sounded it. "I would rather our meeting had been under more auspicious circumstances."

I'm always suspicious of men who talk like that. Not because I don't know what "auspicious" means, but because a man who uses stilted rhetoric is either putting up a phony front or he's blind to the way ordinary people communicate—or both.

I relaxed. "All right, friend; you've got the gun. What do you want?"

"It's very simple," he said. "I want you to persuade the City Council to get rid of Central Control."

I wanted to laugh, but I decided it might not be politic

to laugh in the face of a housebreaker who had a gun leveled at my middle.

Instead, I said: "You might as well ask me to have the Brooklyn Bridges blown up or close up the Staten Island Tubes. Ever since 1972, Central Control has been regulating traffic and communications in the whole Metropolitan Area, and the situation is a lot more complicated now than it was back then. Do you know what would happen if we got rid of Central Control?"

"I have a fairly good idea," he said with a sour grin. "But it's a lot better than having CC in the hands of a power-mad lunatic."

*Meaning yourself?* I was thinking—but I didn't say it aloud. I thought he might even mean me, although the Council doesn't have much to do with CC.

"Look here," I said, "did you come here to kill me?"

"No," he said. "Not unless —unless you refused to listen to me."

"You could have gotten an appointment. I'd have seen you in my office."

He laughed. A hard, short, dry laugh. "I tried that. You wouldn't see me. My name is Kraus—Henry Josef Kraus."

"Oh," I said. "I see." I re-



If he still lived, it would be a miracle.

membered the case, then. Kraus used to work for Central Control. He'd been tossed out on his ear for misappropriation of equipment. He could have been sent to Sing Sing for grand larceny, but CC was good to him; they'd just fired him without recommendations.

Since then, he'd tried to get the ear of several of the other Councilmen. I had been warned that he was a crackpot, so I'd simply told my office staff that I would always be too busy to see Henry J. Kraus. He'd even tried to get in under a phony name once, but one of my staff recognized him.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Kraus," I said, "I don't like looking down the barrel of a five millimeter automatic. You want to talk to me. Very well. I won't signal the police; I won't have you arrested. If you'll put that gun away, I'll just pretend you rang at my door and I let you in in the usual way. I'll give you—" I glanced at my watch. "—I'll give you an hour. I always go to bed at midnight."

"And what if I don't put up the gun, Councilman?"

"Then I'll sit here and listen to what you have to say, naturally. But that gun isn't going to prejudice me in your

favor; it will bother me, and I won't be able to follow your reasoning."

He thought about it for a minute, then made up his mind. The gun vanished into a magnetic holster in his left sleeve.

"I'm sorry about the gun, Councilman," he said. "Maybe I should have come in in the usual way."

I shook my head. "No. I wouldn't have let you in. You went about it the right way. You still are. By the way—how did you get in?"

He grinned his sour grin. "You've got robot locks and an alarm system connected with Central Control. But remember—I used to work for CC. Knowing how to gimmick up the remote controlled devices of Central Control is the only thing that has kept me alive this long."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you," I said. "Get yourself a drink, sit down, make yourself comfortable, and start at the beginning. You only have an hour."

"It won't take that long, Councilman." He eyed the autobar. "I don't normally indulge in alcoholic beverages, but—"

"Go ahead," I told him. "Your nerves need relaxing.

Or, maybe you'd prefer Tranquillo."

"No—no— What were you drinking?"

"Gin rickey. Punch for two."

He punched the appropriate buttons on the autobar. It hummed a little and shoved out a couple of drinks. Kraus took one, handed the other to me, and sat down on the couch. I noticed that he held the drink in his left hand; he kept his right hand free to grab that sleeve gun. I didn't honestly blame him.

"Begin at the beginning, you say?" He looked puzzled, as though he didn't quite know what to say, now that I'd taken him off guard with the pistol business. He'd come in expecting to threaten me and throw his story in my face, and here he was drinking my liquor.

"At the beginning," I said, "but leave out the part about your poor, but honest parents."

He didn't smile. "First, I want you to know that I was framed for that 'misappropriation of equipment' thing. Montrose did it. He's been taking equipment from Supply for years. He had to cover up, and he wanted to get rid of me, so he took a lot of the

extra stuff that he didn't need and put it in my Hobby Doo-it, in my basement—I've got a small house upstate." He looked up at me. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"I'll accept it as a working hypothesis," I said. "Who is this Montrose?"

"F. Hamilton Montrose. He's Programming and Expansion Chief at Central Control. The most important man at CC."

"I thought Bisselworth was head man at CC," I said.

Kraus sneered. "Bisselworth? He's a figurehead; he got there through office politics. He and the others do what Montrose tells them to do." He leaned forward intently. "You see, Councilman Lieth, the man who runs Central Control is the man who controls The Brain itself—and that's Montrose.

"Look at it straight. The Brain is a digital-analog computer, made up of two trillion cryatron units connected by a random-switching relay system—"

"Just a second," I said, holding up a hand. "Unless it's important, spare me the technology. I'm a politician, not a technician.

"I know that Central Control is operated by an electronic brain of some kind that

operates and controls every automobile, every subway train, every form of transportation in the city of greater New York. It also controls the telephone system, the power system, the—”

This time it was his turn to interrupt. “In short, every system of transportation, communication, and power in the area. That’s right, Councilman. And Montrose controls The Brain.”

“So what? What could he do? Foul up traffic? Jam the telephone system?”

Kraus looked angry. “Councilman, suppose he took it in his head to shut the thing off? Do you realize that this city would be without food in less than twenty-four hours? And power is needed, and communication. Can you imagine the chaos that would result?”

“For what?” I asked. “They’d have Montrose in the Tombs within twenty minutes, and have this Brain turned on again. Besides, there’s always the standby Brain. Even if he wrecked the main computer, the standby could be turned on, and the city controls the standby.”

Kraus nodded in irritation. “I know, I know. I was just giving you an example; Montrose has no intention of doing any such thing.”

“Then what is he up to?” I asked.

Kraus downed half his drink before he answered. Then he leaned forward, his dark eyes intent on mine. “Control of the city!” His voice was a hoarse whisper.

*Very melodramatic, I was thinking.* “How?” I asked.

“Can’t you see? He’s got eyes everywhere; he can see through every guard TV pick-up in New York. Look; every important office, every rich home, has a robot guard system—like yours. What happens if you’re robbed—or burgled?”

“A warning is flashed to the nearest precinct station,” I said. “The TV cameras hidden in the walls come on, and the police can take a look at what’s going on. At the same time, a robot controlled squad car full of cops is shunted to the scene of the crime.”

“That’s right. But do you think that’s the only time those cameras can come on? Montrose can turn them on any time. They bypass the police station and go straight to his monitor screens. He can snoop any time, anywhere.”

“That, alone, has netted him plenty of money; he’s watched secret business deals on Wall Street and gotten ad-

vance information which he uses to operate on the stock market.

"Suppose he wanted to kill somebody? All he'd have to do is give The Brain orders not to report the happenings at a certain place. He could walk right in and shoot you, and the robot wouldn't report a thing to the police."

"Hell," I said, "evidently you could have done that yourself. Besides, there's a guard circuit on The Brain itself that prevents that sort of thing; I know that much about it. That thing was built with all kinds of checks and balances to prevent just such things as you claim Montrose is doing."

Kraus nodded. "You're absolutely right. You're not a cyberneticist, so I couldn't explain how thoroughly The Brain was protected against misuse when it was built. Only a major rebuilding of The Brain itself would allow Montrose to control it the way he does."

"Well?"

"Well, damn it, he *has* rebuilt it! Do you think I could have come in here without being reported if I didn't know that The Brain has been gimmicked? Montrose has had ten years to do his work. And he's done it well."

THE SAVAGE MACHINE

"How could he do it undetected?"

"Every time there is a change in the city's transportation or communication system—such as the addition of part of New Jersey to the circuits last year—the computer has to be modified to take care of the change. Every time that was done, Montrose would make a few other changes—small ones that no one noticed. Finally, he had The Brain under control well enough so that he could make more changes without bothering the guarding circuits. Now, he's got the whole city in the palm of his hand."

"I see," I said. It made sense, but it still sounded pretty wild.

Kraus finished his drink, crumpled up the glass, and threw it in the disposal.

"Do you know why I was fired?" he asked. "Do you know why Montrose framed me? Because he was afraid I might find out what he was doing! He didn't know that I already knew! But he knows now! And now he's trying to kill me!"

I lit a cigarette. "Kraus, why didn't you tell all this when the charges were brought against you?"

Kraus looked down at the

floor. "I was afraid. The frame-up was too good. If I'd made any charges, I'd have been arrested and tried and sent to prison. I couldn't stand that—penal servitude. For years—and years. And besides, I couldn't prove anything against Montrose."

"Couldn't we get someone else to check the circuits in The Brain?"

Kraus shook his head. "No. There's nobody on Earth that knows as much about that Brain as Montrose. It would take as long to find out what he's done as it took him to do it.

"No—nobody knows but me, and Montrose is trying to kill me. I can't even leave town to escape him, because he controls all the transportation."

I got the picture then—or thought I did. Kraus had been done out of a job, and he thought Montrose was out to get him. Persecution complex, pure and simple. Or so I thought.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

Kraus's eyes blazed suddenly. "Get the City Council to investigate Montrose! Check his holdings, his business dealings, his income! And turn control of the city over to the standby Brain while

he's being investigated! That has to be done first, or he'll stop the investigation before it gets started! Then get a corps of expert cybernetecists in to tear down the old Brain and check it over; it'll take time, but you'll be able to get Montrose eventually!"

"Haven't you any tangible evidence?" I asked. "Anything that would do as a starting point?"

"No," he said softly. "No. Nothing. Nothing at all." He looked at his watch. "I haven't taken up anywhere near an hour of your time, but that's all I have to say."

I stood up. "Okay, Mr. Kraus. I'll keep my end of the bargain. I won't call the cops. And I'll think over what you've said. I'll look into it; if I find anything worth bringing to the Council's attention, I'll do so."

"All right." He got up from the couch, looking beaten. He probably suspected I didn't put much faith in his wild story of one man controlling all of Greater New York. One unknown man—it was fantastic.

"Let me warn you, though," said Kraus. "Don't do anything in the city itself. Don't even let on that you suspect. Ask a couple of the Council-

men up to your place in the country for the weekend and tell them there. - Otherwise, Montrose will kill you, and you don't know how to stay out of The Brain's reach, like I do."

"Don't worry; if there's anything to this, I'll keep out of his way. Don't worry about me."

He nodded unhappily. I followed him to the front door of my apartment. It was open, and there was a boxlike gadget hanging on the doorknob. A couple of thin, insulated wires came out of it and went into the electronic lock.

Kraus saw me looking at it and gave me a half smile. "It's a handy gadget. I'll take it with me when I go."

He closed the door behind him as he left, and I heard a faint scraping as he pulled the gadget loose from the door. I resolved then and there to do something about that lock; electronic locks were supposed to be foolproof.

I worried Kraus's story around in my mind for a few days, but by the time a week had passed, I'd almost forgotten it. Almost, but not quite. It kept nagging at the back of my brain every so often; I'd push it away, and it would come sneaking back at

the damndest times, interrupting my work and ruining my recreation periods.

But I didn't do anything about it until eight days after my visit from the discharged CC technician.

I was having an after-dinner drink in the Biltmore's Oak Room. It's one of those saloons that tries to preserve the old-fashioned atmosphere — simulated oak panelling and a real bartender instead of a coin-fed autobar. It was expensive, but the food was good, and the barman was a good conversationalist. He had to be; that's what he was paid for; the drinks were mixed in an autobar, but he punched the buttons instead of the customer's having to do it.

Jerry, the barman, and I got into a conversation. I don't remember what it was about — just the usual chit-chat, the weather, politics, whether it was fair to use an electronic robot umpire in the World Series — that sort of thing. Somehow, the conversation got around to the fact that my office is on the top floor of New City Hall.

Jerry grinned. "You know, Councilman, for the past four days, I've been glad I work on the ground floor."

"That so? How come?" I stirred absently at my bour-

bon-and-soda, with only half my mind on the barman's words. I was thinking about Kraus again.

"I saw an accident in the Stratolines Building, over on UN Drive," Jerry said. "An elevator went wrong and dropped fourteen floors to the bottom."

"It must have really gone bad, then," I said. "Those things have all kinds of safety devices on them to stop them before they hit."

"I know. But this one just went smash."

"Anybody hurt?" I was half curious.

Jerry nodded. "Yeah. That's what got me. One guy in it. Mashed him up pretty badly. The cops were on the scene right after it happened. I saw them take him out."

"I wonder what happened? Elevators don't just fall."

"The cops said he must have been fooling with the controls illegally. He had some sort of electronic gadget hooked up to the control panel."

It took all of half a second for that to soak in. I jerked my head up from staring at my drink. "Gadget? That's funny. Did you get the guy's name?"

Jerry thought a minute. "I heard one of the cops mention it when they took his identity

card out of his wallet. Grouse, I think it was."

"You sure it wasn't Kraus—Henry Kraus?"

"Yeah! Yeah, that's it. Why? Did you know him?"

"I met him once," I said carefully. "Can't say I knew him well. Well, that's the way things go." It sounded banal, but I had the feeling right then that someone was watching me and listening to every word I said. Foolish, of course, but—

Anyway, I changed the subject.

When I got home, I checked through my file of newspapers. A Councilman has to keep an eye on what's going on around him, and I make it a habit to read every bit of the news pretty carefully. And I didn't remember any article about a man being killed in an elevator accident.

I was right; there was no mention of it in the newsfax. That bothered me a hell of a lot more than the accident itself. It should have been in the news; an elevator accident involving a fatality isn't commonplace—it's news. Someone would have reported it.

Obviously, it *had* been reported, and then censored out of the facsimile sheets.

Nearly everybody just takes

their morning and evening newssheet for granted. It rolls out of your home reproducer on schedule—if you've paid your bill—and you read it and file it or throw it away. Most people don't stop to consider how it gets to their reproducer.

The articles are fed into the phototransmitter at the newspaper office—the *Times*, the *News*, whatever you get—and they're transmitted to Central Control, where they're put together according to a pre-set program and set up in sheet form, along with the advertisements and comics. This process takes about a minute and a half. Then the image of the finished newspaper is retransmitted to your home, where a light beam reproduces it on sensitized paper, which rolls out to give you your photofacsimile.

If the article about Kraus had been censored, either the editor of every paper in town had killed the story or else The Brain at Central Control had failed to put it into the master sheet for re-transmission. My bet was that CC had censored it, not the editors; there's such a thing as too much coincidence.

And that meant the Kraus's wild story at least had some basis in fact.

I decided then and there to investigate quietly.

Two days later, I was in the office of James Bisselworth, President of Central Control. I'd met him before, at various political and business gatherings, and had had dinner with him and a couple of other men once. Big, heavy-set; gray hair; face chunky and running to redness; a wholesome fellow, with a pleasant manner and a good head for business.

When I stepped in the door of his office, he came around from behind his desk and shook my hand warmly. "How are you, Councilman? Haven't seen you for a while. How are things at City Hall?"

"Well enough," I said. "About as good as a bunch of politicians can make them."

"Fine. Fine. I haven't heard anything about your getting married, so I suppose you're still the most eligible bachelor in the city, eh?"

"Well, none of the post-debs have got their hooks into me yet."

Just talk. Congenial, meaningless talk. It comes automatically when you've been in politics or business long enough.

We strolled over to the big window that filled one whole

wall of Bisselworth's office. "Beautiful this time of year, isn't it?" he said.

"Spring always brings out the best in Central Park," I said.

A lot of people raised a big fuss back in '70, when the Central Control building was built smack in the middle of Central Park, but it couldn't be helped. The Park is the only place in Manhattan where the bedrock is solid and the subways are far enough away so that their vibrations can be effectively damped. The Brain is a sensitive mechanism; it can't stand too much vibration.

Finally, Bisselworth came around to the subject—as I had known he would.

"How about the Connecticut Addition Bill, Councilman? Think it'll pass?" He didn't expect an honest answer; he was just opening the way.

"I'm not sure," I said, "but it looks pretty good. That's why I'm here—sort of get the facts, you know."

Central Control wanted to add a part of southern Connecticut to the circuits. Connecticut had already approved the addition, and so had Albany. Now it was up to the New York City Council.

The bill would pass, and I knew it would, but I had to

have an excuse to take a prowl around Central Control, so I had sort of juggled some of the boys on the Council around a little. The upshot of it was that I'd been sent over to "get a little first-hand information." Which was just what I wanted, but in a different way.

Bisselworth said: "Well, I guess the best way to start is to go down to Planning first. The boys down there can give you an idea of the Connecticut layout. They've got a direct wire Validac set up over there now that's pretty good, and . . ."

He went on talking while we went down to Planning in the elevator.

I spent the next hour listening to electronicists and engineers explain in broad outlines how Connecticut would be connected into the circuits of Central Control.

"It's this area, here," one man said. "Fairfield County, most of New Haven County, and the lower part of Litchfield County. That includes Bridgeport, Waterbury, and New Haven. The power leads . . ."

I listened with half an ear as I looked at the big detail map. My eyes were drawn to a little section in the lower

right corner, where the data boxes were. One of the little squares was labeled: *Expansion Approval*. Inside it, in neat letters, was a trio of handwritten initials.

*F. H. M.*

F. Hamilton Montrose.

I watched while the men projected microfilmed blueprints on a screen, and lectured on the benefits of Central Control, and I noticed that little changes had been made on some of them—corrections, small circuit changes, little improvements. All of them were initialed *F. H. M.*

As the CC men talked, I began to see more of the picture—a picture of power and domination.

All over the United States, the larger cities had long ago installed traffic control systems managed by more or less complex robot control system. No modern city could get along without them; imagine trying to steer a car by yourself through the streets of Philadelphia or Cincinnati! Imagine trying to find a place to park your car!

But by far the greatest concentration of people per square mile in the world, is in Greater New York. That's why New York built the first Central Control unit with cryo-

tronic brain; no other city in the world needed anything quite that complex. No other city in the world has anything approaching The Brain.

And now that ways have been discovered to link in already existing robotic systems with New York's Central Control, making them, in effect, parts of The Brain itself, there is no need to construct other Brains, except, perhaps, as standbys or as supplements to New York's Central Control.

And as each bit of area was added, Montrose became the controlling power of more and more territory.

I didn't like the picture a bit. I was becoming more and more interested in meeting Mr. F. Hamilton Montrose.

The engineers—several of them—talked and demonstrated for a full hour while I kept my ears open and asked what I hope were intelligent questions. At least I got intelligent answers.

Then we spent another hour going around the building, looking at various departments and research labs. Not once was I introduced to anyone named Montrose.

Finally, Bisselworth said, in his hearty voice: "Well, that's about it, Councilman. Any more questions?"

I wanted to say: Yes! *Where the hell is this Montrose guy?* Instead, I just looked mildly surprised.

"All? Good heavens, Jim, I haven't seen your prize possession yet," I said. "Where's this famous Brain of yours?" He chuckled tolerantly. "Anyone can tell you're not a cyberneticist, Councilman. A cryotron brain has to be kept near absolute zero in order to function. Our pet is kept in a thickly-insulated bath of liquid helium."

I could tell he was no cyberneticist, too, but I let it pass. "I know that," I said, "but I thought you might let me see what there is to see."

"There's not much to see, actually," he said, "but if you want to, we can take a look at the programming end. I'll take you down to Montrose's little cubbyhole."

"If it's any trouble—" I began, hoping he wouldn't take the gambit.

"No trouble at all, Councilman; no trouble at all."

We walked toward the elevator. As we stepped inside, he said: "Our Programming Director is a hell of a fine man, but he works better if he's left alone, so we usually don't take visitors down there. But you're an exception, Councilman."

The elevator had started down already, so I thought it would be safe to play it down a little more. "Now, see here, Jim, don't disturb anyone's work on my account."

He brushed that aside with a wave of his hand. "Oh, no, you're not disturbing anyone. Montrose doesn't mind an occasional visitor; it's just that he doesn't like people coming in and out all the time, that's all. He's really a nice sort of fellow—quiet, but pleasant."

That wasn't quite the story I had, but I'd have to wait and judge for myself. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, it was still possible that Kraus had been battier than a church tower.

The elevator lowered us to the sub-basement of the building, where, imbedded in the rigid rock beneath Central Park and immersed in an ultracold bath of liquid helium, lay The Brain.

As we stepped out into the hallway, I heard a faint, high humming sound that filled the air.

"I didn't know The Brain was so musical," I remarked to Bisselworth.

He frowned for a second, then his face cleared. "You mean that hum? That's not The Brain, it's the refriger-

ation mechanism that keeps the helium flowing. The Brain is absolutely silent."

I followed him along a white, aseptic looking hall illuminated by blue-white glow plates in the ceiling.

"Montrose is really quite a thinker," Bisselworth went on, as though he were apologizing for the man. "He's worked a real miracle in simplifying the data input feeds for The Brain. Ten years ago, just programming the machine took a team of fifteen highly trained men. Today, Montrose has three assistants who can learn all they have to know in a simple six-week training course." He chuckled. "I must admit they're cheaper than mathematicians with a Ph. D.; Montrose saved us a lot of money that way."

"What did you do, fire all the math boys as soon as Montrose simplified the data input?" I asked innocently.

Bisselworth looked hurt and indignant. "Of course not; we put 'em on other jobs — research, things like that. The only one we fired was Montrose's chief assistant. Kraus —you may have heard about the case."

"I think I remember something about it."

"He was stealing from the company. Foolish thing for

him to do; he had a good job here. He would have taken over Montrose's job when Montrose retired."

"Maybe he thought you were going to transfer him, like you did the others."

Bisselworth shook his head. "Oh, no. Montrose needs an understudy, and Kraus was a good man. I, myself, promised him that he could keep his job as long as he wanted it, and that he'd be promoted when Montrose retired. Of course, I had no idea he was stealing from us, or I'd have had his contract broken in court right away."

"Oh, yeah; that's right," I said, nodding wisely as if it had just occurred to me, "Kraus was under contract."

We came to a branch in the hallway, and turned left.

"That's right," said Bisselworth. "He came in under the Technical Executive Law, just as Montrose did. We couldn't fire him except for malfeasance, felony, and so forth, and he couldn't quit unless—" He broke off as we came to a heavy door at the end of the hallway. This is Montrose's *sanctum sanctorum*." He laughed self-consciously as he pressed the button at the side of the door, as though he hated to reveal the fact that the president of the company

himself didn't just barge in on F. Hamilton Montrose.

A tall, ordinary-looking, sandy-haired man opened the door. "Hello, Mr. Bisselworth. Come in," he said.

We came in, and Bisselworth said: "Could we see Montrose, or is he busy right now?"

"He said he'd be out at three-twenty, sir; it's almost that now." He glanced at his watch to verify his words. "He's working on the 903 strip now."

I didn't know what that meant, and I had a hunch Bisselworth didn't either, but Bisselworth only said: "I guess we can wait." And I said nothing.

The room echoed with little clicks and buzzes over a faint background hum. It wasn't a very big room, considering its importance; I'd say it was about forty feet by thirty. The walls were literally covered with meters and lights. At the far end, the other two assistants were looking at a bank of oscilloscope screens and taking notes. They had looked at us when we came in, but they immediately gave their attention to their jobs again.

So Montrose had redesigned the input banks, eh? Made them simpler to operate. Very clever; he'd gotten rid of the

cyberneticists who might get wise to his play and substituted ordinary men with a six-week training course.

Because of the contract, he couldn't get rid of Kraus, so he'd framed the man. Again, very clever.

I only hoped I was cleverer.

I was watching a meter needle make erratic wiggles on a meaninglessly numbered dial when I heard the inner door open. I turned to get my first look at F. Hamilton Montrose.

At first, he didn't see us; he was holding a clipboard in his hand and looking at some papers clipped to it, so I had a good chance to study him.

He was a good six inches shorter than I, which would put him at about five seven. His hair was graying and had receded from his forehead; his brows were somewhat darker than his hair—neat, and well-formed. His mouth was firm, and his upper lip was covered with a heavy, but freshly-trimmed moustache. He wore glasses rimmed with dark plastic; the nose they sat on was remarkable. It was a majestic nose—large and finely chiseled. It was neither curved nor hooked; it angled out of his face in a straight line, turning sharply at the

end to give it an almost pointed look. It was quite a nose.

The chin, by comparison, was nothing. It was neither weak nor strong. It was just a chin.

"Hello, Montrose," said Bisselworth after a couple of seconds. "Everything going well, I trust."

Montrose looked up and smiled pleasantly. "Very well, thank you, Mr. Bisselworth." Then he turned and looked quizzically at me out of mild blue eyes.

Bisselworth filled the gap. "This is Charles Lieth, of the City Council. Councilman, this is our Programming and Expansion chief, Hamilton Montrose."

I stepped forward and shook his hand. His grasp was warm and friendly. "What can I do for you, Councilman?" he asked, in a pleasant, well-modulated voice.

"Councilman Lieth has been looking at our plans for the Connecticut addition," Bisselworth said. "The Council wanted him to pay us a visit before they vote on the bill."

Montrose smiled up at me. "I see. Well, I'm afraid that what we have down here isn't much to look at, but you're welcome to see what there is."

"I probably wouldn't under-

stand it too well, anyway," I admitted. "What do you do down here, Mr. Montrose?"

"Well, most of the time, it's programming—giving special orders to it for work of a non-routine nature. For instance, if the City Council decides to hold a parade—" He grinned at me. "—we have to tell The Brain about it. We have to know what streets are going to be used so that traffic can be re-routed in the most efficient manner—that sort of thing. Or if a ship should come in from England, say, with a load of perishables aboard, the information is put in here in order to get the cargo to its destination as quickly as possible.

"And then, too, we have to be prepared for emergencies. Storms — hurricanes, heavy snowfalls, and the like—and fires and explosions have to be treated as special projects.

"Someday, perhaps, we can build a Brain that will handle things like that, but it isn't feasible at present, I'm afraid."

"You mean you have to give special orders every time there's an automobile accident?" I said, doing my best to sound naive.

He chuckled. "Oh, no; not at all. Automobile accidents can happen because of—oh,

faulty construction, wear, lots of things. But they're all planned for. By that, I mean that a certain number of automobile accidents are statistically predictable, so The Brain is able to take care of them. They are what we call 'routine accidents'." He looked at one of the screens on the far wall. "Come here, and I'll show you."

Bisselworth and I followed him over to the screen. There was nothing to see but a wiggly blue line tracing its way across the face of the screen.

"That line," said Montrose, "represents the traffic on the Staten Island - Bronx Highway. Every fluctuation you see is a minor flaw in the traffic pattern caused by improper response of individual automobiles to the robot control. If that line were perfectly steady, it would mean that every car was behaving perfectly. As you can see, they aren't. Now, a big blip on that line would indicate a major accident—a collision, a car going off the road, a stalled vehicle—anything which would break the traffic pattern."

"Since we know that such things do happen and will happen, we can build the proper responses into The Brain to take care of them. The traffic is shunted around

the scene of the accident, and a nearby police car is sent to the scene. If necessary, an ambulance can be sent, but bad accidents like that are rare."

"I see," I said. "Very ingenious."

"Now, over here . . ."

F. Hamilton Montrose showed us all the instruments in the place. He was affable, calm, and polite. After about twenty minutes of such treatment, I was beginning to think I was a fool for ever having paid any attention to Kraus. Montrose seemed like the last person in New York who'd ever be accused of being power hungry.

When the tour of inspection was over, Bisselworth gave me a hearty smile. "Well, there you are, Councilman. You've seen everything but The Brain itself. Of course, if you really want to—" He winked broadly at Montrose—"and if you don't mind a little chill, we'll take you on a guided tour inside it."

"Thanks," I said, "but I didn't bring my overcoat."

Montrose chuckled softly. "Even without an overcoat, you wouldn't be uncomfortable long. The liquid is just a fraction of a degree above absolute zero; it wouldn't take

long for a man to freeze to death." He snapped his fingers to illustrate.

"That's why The Brain is such a cool thinker," said Bisselworth.

I winced inwardly at such wit, but I kept my face from showing it; I even managed a smile.

Montrose offered his hand, and I shook it. "I'm glad you could come down, Councilman."

And he sounded as though he meant it. Mentally, I began kicking myself in the tail for letting myself get roped in by the disordered imagination of a nut like Henry Kraus. Just because Kraus had died in an unusual accident didn't mean a thing; very likely he had jammed the controls himself when he put his doohickey into the panel of that elevator. And there might be perfectly good reasons why the story hadn't come out in the papers.

"It's been a pleasure to show you around," Montrose went on. "It isn't often we find people who show such an intelligent interest in The Brain."

"Thanks," I said; "it is a remarkable machine."

"It certainly is," said Bisselworth. "The Brain never makes a mistake."

Montrose smiled tolerantly.

"Well, that isn't quite true, Mr. Bisselworth."

Bisselworth coughed. "Well, —heh—we don't talk about it's errors." His laugh wasn't exactly forced; it was just embarrassed. He evidently hadn't known the machine could make a mistake.

"Then it does make little errors now and then?" I asked.

Montrose still smiled. "Yes. It's almost human. 'To err is human,' as they say. Once in several hundred billion computations it will happen; statistical error, you see. Can't be helped."

"What sort of errors?"

Montrose spread his hands. "Usually inconsequential ones. A subway train will arrive a few seconds early or late. A phone call will be switched to a wrong number. Things like that." He looked down at his hands. "Normally, such errors aren't even noticed. They're usually very minor, but—"

And then he looked up at me again, and his guileless blue eyes looked innocently into mine.

"But they could be fatal," he said softly.

That evening, I sat in my apartment and thought. And the more I thought about it, the madder I got—at myself. I paced up and down the liv-

ing room, trying to get my brains straightened out.

I had nothing against Montrose; I didn't have one single bit of factual evidence that he was doing anything at all illegal. Kraus, my only witness, was dead, and even if he had been alive, his testimony wouldn't have been worth a damned thing.

And what about Montrose? He had seemed like such a nice, pleasant guy—except for that last remark of his. But had it necessarily meant anything? If he thought I was dangerous, why should he warn me? Why not just knock me off and have done with it, then and there?

None of it made any sense at all.

Maybe his last statement was just a simple remark.

Or maybe it was a deadly threat.

The face in front of me was scowling ferociously. I blinked, and it blinked back. I realized my pacing had brought me in front of the mirror above the autobar.

"Well?" I asked my reflection; "What do you think I ought to do?"

The image mouthed the words right back at me, but it gave no satisfactory answer.

Then I realized I had spoken aloud. If Montrose were

watching through the TV cameras—

I pointed at the reflection. "I'll tell you what you're going to do," I said decisively. "You're going to vote *for* the bill! And that settles it! You hear?"

Then I nodded and forced a smile. "Okay, then; quit haggling."

I turned away from the mirror to the selection panel of the autobar and punched myself a gin rickey. I hoped my little play had gone over, in case Montrose actually was watching.

I sat down in my big, fat relaxer and tried to look as though I had just made an important decision and wasn't worried about a thing. And, after a few minutes of pretending, I actually did come to a decision.

There were three men on the Council who were friends of mine. They'd listen to what I had to say, even if I didn't have any proof. We could propose that the City Council investigate and look for proof. And, furthermore, we could get in touch with the state government in Albany and the Federal Government in Washington, if that became necessary.

I went to the phone and

FANTASTIC

dialed. After a few seconds, the beefy, red, blustery face of John Mahaffey came on the screen. He beamed from ear to ear when he saw my face on his own screen.

"Charlie!" he bellowed. "I wondered who in hell was calling my private number this time of night! It's good to see you! What the devil's up?"

That's like John Mahaffey. You'd think it had been ten years since we'd seen each other instead of three days. He looked and acted like an old-time wardheeler right out of a history of the 1890's, but it was all masking for a shrewd brain and an utter lack of dishonesty or underhandedness. He was so blatantly honest that he was suspected of being a crook—and that's where his enemies underestimated him. As a City Councilman, he couldn't be beat.

"Hi, Johnnie. I called to see if you were going to be busy tomorrow night. I'm throwing a little poker party up at my place in Fishkill—thought I'd give you a chance to contribute to my bank balance."

"You?" He laughed thunderously. "Hell, boy, if I couldn't play poker any better than you, I'd start using marked cards. Just a second, let me check." He looked off

the screen for a moment to take a quick glance at his appointment calendar. "Dammit! I'm supposed to be at some Ladies' Luncheon League meeting! What the hell is a Luncheon League meeting in the evening for? But I'm not scheduled to speak; they won't miss me, and I sure as hell won't miss them. Okay, Charlie; I'll be at your place — when?"

"Say at eight?"

"Good enough. And I'll bring my own cards."

"Fine."

I cut the connection, and made two more calls. Manetti couldn't make it, but Bergaust said he'd be there with bells on. That was okay; the three of us could discuss it and talk to Manetti later if it was necessary.

I mixed myself a nightcap and went to bed.

The following afternoon, I got my car out of the garage and put a few things in it for my trip to Fishkill—a forty-five minute drive upstate.

I debated for a while on the possibility of taking a train, but I dropped the idea. I never took the train if I could help it, and any deviation from my usual habits might make Montrose suspicious. There was a chance that he was already

suspicious, but I didn't think he was sure I knew anything. His remark about fatal accidents was simply a test, the way I had it figured. If I hadn't been aware of his activities, the warning would have meant nothing; if I did know anything, the warning was calculated to make me do something out of the ordinary. If I just behaved in my normal fashion, it ought to lull his suspicions, if he had any.

Actually, I was being plain bullheadedly blind. I still hadn't got it through my head that there was anything to worry about. I had the "It can't happen here" attitude. The concept of my life's being in danger simply didn't seem real to me. To me, the whole thing was just a job of political juggling to get rid of a pernicious influence in the City, and I went about handling it the same way I would have handled a case of graft or bribery in high office.

So when the garage attendant said: "So long, Mr. Lieth; have a good time," I just waved at him, set the controls, punched for the West Side Highway, and leaned back to relax.

In other words, I succumbed to force of habit; like a damned fool, I had let The

Brain take over control of my car.

The car purred along the streets, making the proper stops, making the correct turns, all in accordance with the destination I had punched. I had been smoothly co-ordinated with the overall traffic pattern of the City.

A few minutes later, my radio said: "You have just entered the 46th Street ramp of the West Side Highway. Please punch for the exit desired. This highway runs north to the Bronx, Yonkers, Hastings, Dobbs Ferry, Tarrytown, Ossining, Croton, Peekskill, Garrison, Cold Spring, and Beacon. At Beacon, changeover must be made for Poughkeepsie, Hudson, Albany and Troy. Please punch your destination."

I punched for Beacon, which is just a few miles from Fishkill, and paid no further attention; I was reading *Bobby's Burden* and ignoring the road.

The car picked up speed and went into the second lane at eighty-five, where it kept its place in the pattern as usual.

I felt the car swerve a few minutes later and looked up to see what was going on. I was back in the left-hand lane, still moving at eighty-five

miles an hour. Ahead of me, there was a long, clear section in the lane, although I was rapidly gaining on the car several blocks ahead. A sign flickered past. *Next Exit 125th Street.*

Then the voice came over my radio. Not the flat, recorded voice of The Brain giving the usual instructions, but the voice of F. Hamilton Montrose.

"You were warned, you ignored the warning. You are doing just as your informer suggested. I'm afraid you will have to join your informer."

The voice sounded almost apologetic.

Still at eighty-five miles per hour, my car swerved wildly to the right and roared down the exit to 125th Street. I knew it would never make the sharp curve at the bottom.

With only seconds to act, I grabbed the ends of the safety belt and snapped them into place.

At the curve, the car twisted again. It went into a flat sideskid, slammed against the low concrete abutment, and went over the side.

Glass shattered all around me, and the metal of the car screamed as it was crumpled and torn. The vehicle barrel-rolled over and over, jerking me viciously in the seat.

Somewhere in there, I must have passed out. I can only vaguely remember the screaming smashup that ended the accident.

I wasn't out very long—ten or fifteen seconds, maybe. But when I opened my eyes, I couldn't quite orient myself for a moment. Something was pressing on my waist, and my hands were waving queerly in the air. All around me, I could smell the fumes of fuel alcohol, and it seemed awfully quiet after all that noise.

Then I realized that the car was upside down; I was hanging by my safety belt. I wanted to get myself out of the car, but somehow I didn't feel like moving.

Then there were running footsteps and voices outside.

"What a smashup!"

"... probably dead . . ."

Somebody stuck his head into the window. I blinked at him foolishly.

"You—you all right?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe. Help me out of here."

Hands unbuckled the belt and lowered me out of the seat. Other hands helped pull me free of the wreckage.

"How do you feel, buddy?"

"He's got blood all over him."

"That's from the cuts, I think."

Fingers probed, voices buzzed. I felt lousy.

But I was all in one piece. There was a cut over my forehead, but it wasn't a very deep one. I felt as though I was bruised all over, which was pretty close to the truth.

Then I heard a wail in the distance. Sirens! The Brain had automatically notified the police and the nearest hospital and then cleared the way for them.

They were coming to get me! And the last thing on Earth I wanted was to be back in the hands of Montrose and The Brain.

I panicked then. I pushed myself to my feet and started running.

Behind me, somebody yelled something. I kept on running.

Things got hazy then. I was suffering from shock and loss of blood, but I somehow managed to keep going. I had no idea where I was going; I was just going.

Even after my mind became so foggy that I didn't know anything else, one thing kept pounding inside my skull — *get away!*

*Qué hora es?*"

"*Nueve y media. Por qué?*" Spanish. Somebody wanted

to know the time, and somebody else said it was nine thirty. The voices drifted off for a minute, too low to hear, then came back again.

"*Nunca he oido tal historia.*"

It was a woman's voice. "I've never heard such a story." Such a story as what?

The man's voice was somewhat lower; I couldn't hear what he was saying until he came up with: "*El se cortó la cabeza.*"

"He cut his head." Then I knew they were talking about me. And that brought my memory back a little. I forced my eyes open.

"*Qué lugar es éste?*" I said. "Where am I?"

"Well! Our guest has aroused himself," said the man's voice in Spanish. "How do you feel?"

"Terrible. May I have some water?" I turned my head toward the voice.

"*Por cierto!* Bring some water for Señor Lieth, madre mia."

There were three people in the room. The man was about five feet ten, with a smiling, round face and a body like a wrestler's. His hair was clipped fairly short, showing the contours of his skull. His eyes were so dark brown that they were almost black.

The woman was older, gray-er, and thinner than the man. Her face had the texture and color of old leather. But, old as she looked, there was noth-ing decrepit in the way she walked across the room to get me a glass of water.

The third member of the trio was an adolescent girl. Fourteen at the most, maybe younger. She was just sitting in a chair saying nothing and looking interested.

"You know who I am, then?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," said the man. "When you fell at our door-step, we brought you in. Naturally, I looked at your wallet." He smiled even more. "You carry a great deal of money, Councilman. But I assure you it is still there."

"All but five dollars," cor-rected the girl, speaking for the first time. "We got some bandages and antiseptic."

"That, of course," said the man. "Permit me to introduce myself and my family, Coun-cilman. I am Alfredo Francisco Felipe Tejado. This is my daughter, Alicia Maria Vir-ginia, and my mother, Con-stanza Inés Isabel."

The old woman smiled as she brought in the water and held it to my lips. "Most of the time," she said in surpris-ingly colloquial English, "we

are called Al, Alice, and Grandmaw."

Alfredo chuckled. "That's not quite true, Councilman. Alicia has always called her *abuela*, and I do, myself, sometimes, but if I ever heard anyone outside the family call her anything but Señora Te-jado, I'd clobber him." His English was as good as hers.

I grinned up at the old lady. "Do you think he would do that, *Doña Constanza*?" I asked in Spanish.

She laughed. It was soft, almost silent, but it was pleas-ant. "One can see why you are a politician, Señor Lieth. Only such a man could call a poor woman *Doña* and make it sound like flattery instead of sarcasm."

I looked around the room. It was evidently part of a base-ment apartment. Clean, but obviously the home of a family in the lower-class income brackets. The plastic sheath-ing of the walls was dull with many washings, and the syn-therfoam flooring was un-even and probably had lost a great deal of its resiliency. There were a few pictures on the wall — an inexpensive landscape print, an old-fash-ioned surrealistic abstraction, and a couple of color photos, one of a man, the other of

a woman. The handsomest things in the room were a large, hand-carved wooden crucifix on one wall and a small, beautifully polychromed shrine of the Blessed Virgin in one corner. On either side of it, a small votive light burned bluely through its glass cup.

"If you're wondering where you are, Councilman," said Alfredo, "you're about four blocks from where your car cracked up. Somehow, you managed to get from there to our front door. You stumbled down the stairwell; Alicia heard you and called me." Again he smiled. "I could tell by your clothing that you weren't just a drunk. Besides, you were covered with blood. I brought you in. No one saw you; our doors lead into an alley."

"Daddy looked at your wallet to see who you were," little Alicia interjected. "And after we washed the blood off your face, we recognized you from your pictures in the papers."

"You didn't call the police?"

Alfredo shook his head. "No. My mother said you weren't badly hurt—she used to be a nurse—so she decided to fix you up before we notified anyone. We sent Alicia out for the bandages and

stuff, and told her to notify the police, but—"

"—But I didn't when I saw the paper," said Alicia.

Alfredo rose apologetically. "We don't have a newsfac reproducer of our own," he said, "but Alicia got one on the corner machine when she saw the headline. Besides, the people in this neighborhood don't care for the police too much."

He walked over to a small table, picked up a newsfac sheet, and brought it to me.

The headline read:

*"Councilman Lieth Flees After Confronted With Embezzlement Charges! Accident at 125th Street Fails to Stop Runaway Councilman."*

I was accused of juggling the books of the City treasury and making off with some three-quarters of a million dollars in cash!

It was easy to see what had happened. As soon as Montrose had realized he had failed to kill me, he had framed me—in the same way he had framed Kraus.

The Brain at Central Control did all the budget figuring for the City Council, and, as head of the Committee on Appropriations, I had control of a great deal of the City's

finances. Montrose had simply ordered The Brain to change its figures around so that it would appear that a great deal of money had gone into my own pockets. With the proof in front of them in black and white, the courts weren't going to pay much attention to my charges against Montrose.

As a matter of fact, I would probably never come to trial or get a chance to air my charges; once I was in the hands of the authorities, it would be easy for The Brain and Montrose to arrange another accident. And the chances were that the second accident would be fatal; I couldn't expect such phenomenal luck twice.

What could I do? Phone Mahaffey and the others? Not likely; once I tried to use a phone, The Brain would know exactly where I was; I wouldn't be allowed to say more than half a syllable.

My own picture stared up at me from the paper; underneath it, a caption said:

"Councilman Charles Lich Sought by Police"

I sat up in the bed. "Get me my clothes," I said. "I've got to get things done."

"*Uno momentito!*" said the old woman imperatively. "If you leave now, the police will

surely arrest you, and then the Señor Montrose and *El Cerebro* will get you. You are safe here, *Don Carlos*."

I stopped. She knew a great deal more than I had thought. And besides, an old woman like her wouldn't address me as "Don Carlos" unless she really had respect for me. Just how much *did* she know about *El Cerebro*—The Brain? And how had she found it out?

"You would harbor a suspected criminal?" I asked, reverting to Spanish, as she had. "Your family may be in for trouble."

"You have been here for four hours and there is no trouble yet," she pointed out. "As to being suspected, that can happen to any man; our enemies often accuse us of things we have not done." Her seamed face broke into a smile, and she quoted an old proverb: "*Muchos hombres son embusteros. Esto explica el porqué de las leyes.*"

Many men are liars. This explains the reason for laws.

"That's true," I said, "but how do you know it is not I who am the liar?"

"Gee, you couldn't be," Alicia broke in in English. "Nobody can tell lies when they're knocked silly, can they?"

I looked at Alfredo. "I was raving?"

He smiled apologetically. "'Fraid so, Councilman. I admit I don't understand the way this machine works, but I can see how the man who controls it would be very dangerous. And the very fact that your car was wrecked shows that you are right.

"I went down to see the wreck. They had towed your car away, but I could see that the damage had been caused by a very fast-moving car. It looked deliberate to me."

"Besides, Don Carlos," said the old woman, "we know you to be an honest man. Otherwise, we wouldn't have voted for you."

It was that simple. They believed in me; therefore, they trusted me. For a moment, I was thankful that I had taken the trouble to learn Spanish when I went into politics; it had certainly helped me with my Spanish-speaking constituency. Then I realized that Spanish didn't have much to do with it; there were probably plenty of "my constituents" who hated my guts. I was just lucky that Alfredo Francisco Felipe Tejado and family weren't among them.

It's days like those that make a man glad he's an honest politician.

"If you have a plan in mind, Don Carlos," said the old wo-

man, "we will give what help we can."

"Thank you, Doña Constanza," I said. And this time, I meant it.

Montrose was out to kill me. He had to kill me, and do it quickly. And that meant he had to find me. What methods would he use? I had to think of everything he might do and anticipate it.

I knew where I had made my first mistake. I had assumed that Montrose had known nothing of my conversation with Kraus. The discredited technician had seemed so positive that his gadgets would protect him that I had automatically assumed that the TV cameras in my room weren't operating. Obviously, they *had* operated; Montrose had been watching at the time. His remark to me over the radio, just before my car crashed, showed that.

I should have realized that Kraus's gadgets were ineffective; otherwise, Montrose wouldn't have been able to kill him in the elevator, once he got his gadget hooked up.

Therefore, I had to assume that any attempt of mine to use the communication systems—telephone, visiphone, or telefac—would be self-betrayal, *ipso facto*. The same thing

applied to any attempt to use public transportation of any kind, or to go near any place which might have TV cameras, either exposed or concealed.

I couldn't use a non-vision phone, even. The Brain had my voice profile in its memory banks, and I couldn't disguise it enough to fool the machine, even if I gave a phony name. As soon as I spoke, The Brain would compare the voice with previous recordings it had taken and check the subtle similarity points; as far as The Brain was concerned, a man's voice was as distinctive as his fingerprints.

I stewed over the problem for an hour before I finally came up with what might be an answer.

Alfredo and his mother and daughter had left me strictly alone while I thought. I could hear them in the other room, speaking softly, going about their business, waiting until I was ready for them.

When I finally thought I had it, I went to the door and called: "Alfredo! Come here a minute, will you? I think I have an idea."

Alfredo came in smiling. "Si? Is there anything we can do?"

"I think so." I glanced at

my watch. "It's twenty minutes of eleven. Do you know where Halmeyer's is?"

"The all-night department store? Sure. There's one on Amsterdam and 124th, and another one on Broadway and 110th. They're the closest."

"Good. We'll need both of them. Now here's what you must do: You and Doña Constanza go to the one on 124th. Go in separately, as though you aren't together. You will each buy a Model 177 Rhinehurst pocket recorder in the electronic department and an Atomo wrist watch in the clock department. Then your mother will come back here with those while you go down to 110th to get another recorder and another Atomo watch. Got that?"

"I don't want anyone to wonder why one man is buying three recorders and three watches."

"I see. Very well; I will buy a recorder while *madre mia* buys a watch and then I will buy a watch while she buys a recorder. *Simplisimo.*"

"Good. And get the proper styles — a man's watch for yourself and ladies' watches for the women. They've got to look natural."

Alfredo laughed a little. "I don't think an atomic regulated watch will look natural on

any of the three of us ; they're pretty expensive."

"That's so, but there are plenty of cheaper watches that try to imitate them. I wouldn't worry about it." I opened my wallet and shelled out some cash. It took most of what I had on me, but if my idea worked, it would be well worth it.

"Now, hurry, Alfredo; we want to get this over with."

He nodded and went into the other room. A minute or two later, I heard him leave with his mother. After a few more minutes, there was a knock on the door.

"It's me—Alicia."

"Come on in, Alicia."

She came in, carrying a bottle of red wine and a large glass. "My father said to bring you this. He said that a good glass of wine would help you relax." She giggled. "He says you're as nervous as a cat."

"I guess I am. Thanks." I sat down at the table and poured myself a glass of the dark red liquid. "Are you allowed to have wine? I hate to drink by myself."

"Only at meals, usually. And on Holy Days." Then she grinned the impish grin of a little girl who is up to some legitimate devilment. "But I'll

have a little one with you. It isn't every day we have a visit from a Councilman."

She went and got herself a small glass and filled it about half full.

"Alicia, what does your father do? For a living, I mean."

She cocked her head over to one side. "Well, that depends. He does several different things—jobs, I mean, to make money. Right now, he's working in an automatic laundry.

"But mainly he's an artist." She pointed a finger. "See that crucifix? It's carved out of a single piece of wood. My daddy did that. And see the one of Saint Mary? He did that, too—and colored it, too. He's very good. But—" She shrugged and sighed in one fluid motion. "—he can't make much money at it. He hasn't made a name for himself yet."

I looked again at the crucifix and the statue. "Don't worry, Alicia; he will." I don't claim to be a judge of great art, but I could tell the man had talent—and maybe something more than talent.

Alicia and I talked about things in general for another half hour, while I finished off two glasses of the excellent wine. Alicia was content with her half glass, which she sipped slowly.

Between the wine and the child's conversation, I managed to get my nerves simmered down to a bearable point. I hadn't realized how edgy I was until the girl had pointed it out.

Even the aches and pains from the wreck were subsiding a little.

It was eleven-fifteen when Alfredo and his mother came back with the things I had ordered. Then the four of us sat down around the table, and I outlined our strategy. I had to send Alicia out for a map of the city in order to get everything plotted out properly, but we finally got it all straightened out.

First, I recorded nine different little speeches, three on each recorder. Then I gave each of the Tejadas a list of three addresses, places where there were public no-vision phones.

"Now let's get this straight," I said at last. "You go into the phone booth at each of these places. You dial the numbers I've given you. When someone answers, you play the message without saying anything. As soon as it's finished, you hang up and get to the next place, where you repeat the procedure. Okay?"

Alfredo nodded. "We've got it."

"All right. Now, let's synchronize our watches. These calls have to be timed exactly. We can allow a minute or so leeway, but not more than that. Keep it to less than thirty seconds either way if you possibly can."

"We'll do it," said Alfredo. "Won't we, mother — won't we, Alicia?"

"Si."

"Si."

"Okay. Here's some expense money; now let's go."

"What are you going to be doing while we are making these calls, Don Carlos?" asked the old woman.

"I'm not going to tell you, señora. If you get caught, you can say you know nothing. But you shouldn't get caught; they won't be looking for you."

"Very well."

"One thing," said Alfredo. "You intend to go out, don't you?"

I nodded. "I'll have to."

"Then come back into my studio for a moment. I have a small idea. What you need is a new face."

I didn't see what he was driving at, but I followed him into a back room.

It would take an hour to do justice to a description of the things I saw in that room. A

hundred pages of type couldn't begin to tell about the dainty figurines, the strongly executed busts, and the massive, heroic-sized statues that were packed into that little studio. But I wasn't allowed time to look them over carefully; Alfredo pulled me over to the corner where his workbench stood, saying, "Come on, Councilman; you said we haven't much time, so we must work quickly."

He put his hands on my cheeks and turned me to face the light. I began to feel a little foolish, saying nothing while he looked at me through half-closed eyes.

Then he went to work. He covered my face with some sort of cement and began putting layers of resilient plastic over my face, filling in here and there with some stuff from a spray can.

And all the time, his fingers were moving over my face, pushing here, pulling there, moulding the stuff to my cheeks, chin, neck, and forehead.

It didn't take more than fifteen minutes. When he was through, he looked it over critically.

"That ought to do," he said. "Don't get into too bright a light, and don't try to wash your face. You'll pass."

He led me over to a mirror, and I looked.

Another man stared out at me. He was fatter and more bulbous nosed than I. He looked like a self-satisfied, middle-class merchant who ate too much and drank too much and still wasn't too ugly. It would do, all right.

It was twenty-five minutes after midnight when I strolled into Central Park at the entrance near 86th Street. The long walk had done me good; it had taken some of the stiffness out of my muscles. The only trouble was that the exercise, combined with the warmth of the evening air was making me perspire — especially under the thick layers of plastic that Alfredo had put on my face.

The mask had done its job well; the area around 125th Street had been swarming with cops, but not one of them had taken a second look at me. One sergeant who knew me well had looked me straight in the face and gone on his way. Without the mask, I might never have made it this far south.

But now it was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

I strolled on into the park, doing my best to look like a late-working man out for his

evening constitutional. There were a few patrolmen around, but not many.

That was where I had an advantage over F. Hamilton Montrose; he didn't dare attract too much attention to The Brain and Central Control. As far as the public was concerned, there was absolutely no reason why Councilman Charles Lieth should come anywhere near Central Control. Montrose didn't dare ask for extra protection.

At least he didn't dare ask for extra police. But, unless I was way off the beam in my figuring, Central Park itself would be full of mechanical and electronic protection.

Years ago, Central Park had been one of the most dangerous places in New York. No honest man or woman in his or her right mind would have gone into the Park after dark. Even the police had traveled in pairs. Muggings, robberies, rapes, and beatings had been commonplace. A move had even started to do away with the Park completely; some people insisted that the concealing bushes and secluded pathways were a temptation to crime and should be done away with.

With the coming of Central Control, however, the problem

had been solved. The illusion of privacy was retained, but it was just that—an illusion. There were hidden microphones and TV cameras everywhere. There was no secret about it; everyone knew it. Nothing could be done in the Park without the police knowing about it. Their hidden eyes were everywhere.

In the first year after the installations were put in, there were nearly three thousand arrests. In the second year, there were less than three hundred. The Park again became a place where people could enjoy the evening countryside in the center of the world's greatest metropolis.

So I was perfectly well aware that the minute I walked into the Park I was under the potential surveillance of The Brain.

That's why I chose the lightest entrance I could find.

I know; that sounds a little foolish, but basically, it made sense. In order to preserve the feeling of shadowed darkness, Central Park still only has widely spaced lighting; little oases of light surrounded by darkness. But the dark places are lit, too—by invisible infrared light. The human eye can't see infra-red, but a TV camera can if it's built to do so.

A man may think he's in utter darkness in the Park, but whoever is watching the screen connected to the hidden camera nearby can see him as plainly as though it were broad daylight.

But plastic doesn't look the same under infra-red illumination as it does under visible light. While my disguise might fool the human eye, it wouldn't fool the infra-red eye of a TV camera. My face would look completely wrong; Montrose would spot me in a minute if I tried to get into the Park by going over a wall in the darkness.

So, as I said, I walked in under the bright glow of the daylight lamps at the 86th Street entrance. And I stayed on the lighted pathways.

I kept my pace slow and leisurely, and tried not to look as though I were in any hurry to get anywhere. I tried to look as though I didn't care where I ended up. I passed a couple of patrolmen; they glanced at me and went on.

Finally, I found a bench with a light over it—a bench within a two-minute walk, or a one-minute run, of the Central Control building. I sat down, pulled a magazine out of my pocket, and began to read.

I had my watch on the in-

side of my left wrist so that I could glance at it every so often without seeming to be impatient.

At fifteen minutes of one, the first call would go through.

I had to concentrate to keep my mind on the magazine; I had to look as though I were actually reading it.

Once, I found myself humming:

*Every journey has an end—*

*When at the worst, affairs will mend—*

*Dark the dawn when day is nigh—*

*Hustle your horse and don't say die!*

I wanted badly to light a cigarette, but the plastic foam mask on my face felt as if it would fall off if I moved my mouth much. My skin was becoming positively soggy under it.

I waited.

And waited.

Twelve forty-five. The first call went in.

I waited.

Twelve forty-eight. The second call went in.

And still I waited.

Twelve fifty-one. The third call.

Twelve fifty - five. The fourth.

One minute of one. The fifth.

I listened carefully to the noise of the great city that surrounded me. Slowly, it began to change. The change was subtle at first, hardly distinguishable, but as the minutes passed, it became more and more obvious that something peculiar was going on.

By the time the sixth call went in at two minutes after one, the change was obvious. There was a wailing of sirens all over the city. The whine of tires on pavement had decreased markedly, and had been replaced by the low roar of idling motors.

I put my magazine in my pocket and stood up. I intended to run for the Central Control building, but the Fates were against me. A cop was strolling along toward me. The only thing I could do was walk toward him.

He glanced at me and looked away. Then he did a double take and looked back.

"Hey, buddy! What's the matter with your face?"

I felt as though the bottom had fallen out of my stomach.

He stepped closer. "Do you feel all right?" Then his eyes widened. "Why—!"

I didn't let him get any farther. I brought my fist up

from my hip, putting every ounce of my weight behind a hard, driving uppercut.

It caught him clean, snapping his head back and sending him off to Cloud-Cuckooland. I grabbed him as he slumped. My right fist felt as though someone had stepped on it, but it was still useable; I decided it wasn't broken, though it hurt that much.

I put the cop behind some bushes. He'd be discovered eventually, but I hoped the present confusion of The Brain would delay that discovery. As an afterthought, I relieved the policeman of his pistol and dropped it into my coat pocket.

Then I reached up to my face. The plastic mask was hanging soggily; the perspiration underneath had finally loosened it completely. I jerked it off, threw it into a bush nearby, and started running toward the Central Control building.

Nothing happened. The police were too busy to watch their screens; I hadn't been noticed. The Brain was too confused to pay any attention, and Montrose hadn't been able to follow everything that took place.

By that time, the ninth call had gone through. I cursed mentally; the cop had delayed

me longer than I had intended.

But the City was in an uproar.

There was a light over the side entrance of the CC building, and an armed guard standing near it. I walked straight up to him, took the pistol out of my pocket, pointed it at his midsection, and said: "Turn around."

"But—" His eyes looked a little dazed, as though he wasn't quite sure what was going on.

"Turn around," I repeated.

He turned around. I took his gun out of his holster and dropped it into my other pocket. "Okay, pal; forward march. Into the building."

He marched.

It's a funny thing about armed guards; unless they are kept constantly on the alert, they become complacent. Their sidearm becomes a symbol of authority instead of a weapon. This guy probably hadn't had to do anything with that gun since the day it was issued to him—except maybe clean and oil it.

Once inside, I marched him down a side hall, away from the front entrance.

"You're not going to kill me, are you?" he asked in a half-strangled voice.

"Not unless I have to," I

told him. "There's a janitor's closet on this floor; where is it?"

He led me past a row of darkened offices to a plain, solid aluminum door.

"Open it," I said.

He fumbled with a ring of keys at his belt, selected one, and unlocked the door. There were a couple of wheeled machines inside—an automatic vacuum cleaner, and an automatic scrubber and polisher. On the shelves were bottles of wall sprays, waxes, metal polishes, and detergents of various kinds. There were a few rags in one corner, and an old-fashioned push-broom standing against a wall. The whole room was about seven feet square.

"All right, give me your jacket and trousers. Hop to!"

Five minutes later, I was heading down towards the basement wearing the guard's uniform. The unhappy guard was locked securely in the janitor's closet in his underwear.

I didn't take the elevator; Montrose had a way with elevators that didn't appeal to me at all.

There were men moving all over the place by this time; none of them paid any attention to me because they were

too busy with their own problem.

One technician sprinted by me with a distracted look in his eye. "My God," he said to no one in particular, "traffic is jammed up tight all the way from the Battery to Inwood Hill Park! My God! Tunnels blocked, bridges blocked! My God!" He went on down the hall, chanting further invocations of The Deity.

I opened a stairway door and started down. From somewhere above, a voice yelled: "Montrose! Somebody get Montrose!"

Someone else answered: "He says he don't want nobody down there! Get his assistant on the phone if you need him! He needs elbow room!"

I felt a positive glow of achievement as I went down the steps.

Two men came bustling up the stairs toward me.

"It just can't happen, Sam," said one. "It just can't."

"Try telling that to the people of New York," said the other grimly.

"But why? What the hell happened?"

"You tell me, I'll tell you, and then we'll both know."

They pushed past me without even looking at me and went on up the stairs.

I could hear elevator doors opening and closing all over the building. Everybody was busy, and I would have bet an even thousand dollars that nobody was actually getting anything done for the simple reason that they didn't know what to do.

I finally reached the basement where Montrose's office and, as Bisselworth had called it, *sanctum sanctorum* was located. Around me, I could hear the hum of the refrigeration mechanism.

I hadn't taken more than three steps down the hall when I heard something slam behind me. I spun around, drawing my gun at the same time.

There was no one there, but my escape had been cut off. A heavy emergency fire-door had slammed down between me and the stairway.

A voice suddenly filled the corridor: "I don't know how you got in here, Lieth, but you're not getting out alive!"

I didn't take time to argue; I just looked around. The walls were plain and undecorated, the lens ought to be easy to spot. It was. I found it in one wall, set high above a door. I took careful aim and fired.

There was a loud *pop!* from

the wall, and a few tendrils of smoke oozed out of the bullet hole.

Then I turned and ran straight toward Montrose's office. With one of his television cameras shot out, he wouldn't be able to see what I was doing until I came within range of another one.

Montrose's command of epithet and invective was remarkable. He didn't use any foul words I hadn't heard before, but his method of combining them into phrases was original and quite artistic. I half expected the air to turn bright blue at any moment.

I kept running, and kept an eye open for the telltale lens openings of the hidden TV cameras. In a decorated office or a bank building or an apartment, those lenses can be concealed behind one-way mirrors or in light fixtures, but in a place like this, there was nothing to hide them behind. I blew out two more as I ran down the hallway.

Ahead of me, I heard another loud slamming noise. I knew what it was; Montrose had dropped another fire-door between himself and me.

The loudspeakers in the hallways were silent now. Montrose had shut up after his outburst of cursing. I fig-

ured I really had him going; he was being screamed at via telephone from 'all over the building, and I was attacking from outside his den. He couldn't handle a rebellious Brain and me at the same time, and without The Brain, he was just another man.

I had no intention of breaking down the fire-door at the other end of the hallway; I didn't have the tools to smash through an insulated, six-inch steel firewall. I turned right, instead, looking for another door. I found one, but it was locked.

I looked around for another lens opening. There was one; I started to run back the way I'd come, then I stopped and blew out the camera lens. It took two shots; my hands were getting a little shaky from the strain.

Then I ran back to the locked door. I hoped that Montrose would think I was going back the other way.

It took me what seemed like an hour to find a key on the guard's key ring that fitted the door, but it couldn't have been more than a minute. The bolt finally turned, and I opened the door.

It was a big room, full of pipes that ran all across the ceiling and snaked around the walls. There were relay racks

full of clicking electrical mechanisms, and a big sign nearby said: *Danger! High Amperage! 880 volts!*

From the size of the heavy relay switches, I could see that the sign meant what it said.

I decided there must be a door on the other side of the room, but the relay racks blocked my vision. They filled the place like the bookshelves in the Public Library stacks, reaching almost to the ceiling, with only narrow aisles between them. I stayed close to the wall and headed for the other side.

I was almost to the corner of the room when I caught a flash of motion out of the corner of my eye. I spun behind one of the relay racks just as a bullet spanged off the wall near where I had been standing. The shot wasn't very loud in the room; the clattering noise of the chattering electrical relays made a pretty high-level background sound.

"He's behind number three!" said a voice. Montrose.

*Then it wasn't Montrose who was shooting at me!*

I realized then that I had badly underestimated Montrose. His assistants shouldn't be here if they were just ordinary working stiffs. I had assumed Montrose was alone. Now I knew that his "assist-

ants" must be—had to be—his confederates in the whole thing. Otherwise they wouldn't be working at one o'clock in the morning.

I was outnumbered four to one.

I didn't know how many of them were in the relay room, but I didn't think there was more than one. Montrose was in the control room, watching me and giving orders to his henchman. There ought to be at least two men trying to get The Brain out of its snarl. Still, I had to assume that all three of them were in there with me.

I took a quick peek around a bank of relays, saw nothing, and jumped across the aisle, behind another relay rack.

"Now he's at number seven," said the voice from the speaker; "He's on the input side."

I decided right then that that old stuff had to go. I never did like tattletales.

There were five banks of daylight glow-plates overhead. I blazed away with two quick shots. Two banks of glow-plates went out. Then I ducked quickly to another rack of relays.

There was another shot from the enemy, but I didn't hear any ricochet. I fired twice

more. Now, the only light in the room came from a bank of glow-plates at the far end of the relay racks.

I ducked around a little more, and blew the last bank of glow-plates out.

Montrose quit giving orders. It would take him a little time to adjust his cameras for infra-red pickup, and meanwhile I'd have time to do a little work of my own. I started moving toward the door again. I had figured it led toward Montrose, and since his henchman—or henchmen—had come in through it, I felt my guess was justified.

There was still some light in the room—a dull blue glow from the thousands of electronic tubes in the relay racks. It wasn't enough to read by, but it was enough to navigate by.

I found a dark area near the door and just stood there, keeping my eyes open, waiting for something to move in the blue-tinged darkness. I tried to keep my ears tuned for odd sounds, too, but it didn't do much good; the din of the clacking relays drowned out any footsteps I might have heard.

Then I heard a voice.

*"Montrose! Guide me! For the love of heaven, where is he?"*

If anyone could have seen the expression on my face at that moment, I'll lay odds that they would have described it as a "wolfish grin." My opponent was getting panicky. He knew I was waiting for him, perhaps stalking him, and he didn't have the guts to stand still and wait. The odds were turning in my favor.

After he yelled, he realized that I might spot him by his voice, so he got away from there fast—too fast. I saw him moving, silhouetted against a bank of blue-glowing tubes. He turned a corner and huddled against one of the racks. I knew exactly where he was.

I carefully raised my gun, aimed, and fired. The instant I heard the report, I leaped to one side, out of his line of fire.

There was no answering shot. I heard a scream and saw a blue flash of fire. Then there was the sound of something falling.

I edged around to take a look. The man, whoever he was, was supine on the floor. There was a red glow of smouldering cloth on one sleeve. He had been slammed against a hot switch by the impact of the bullet and his arm had shorted across the terminals for an instant. He

was in no condition to move around.

I headed for the door again.

As I approached it, I saw that it was open. Beyond, there was nothing but darkness.

I was stuck — but good. I didn't dare go into that darkened room. I didn't know what was in it, nor who might be waiting for me. Besides the fact that I couldn't see anything, there was the equally unpleasant fact that Montrose and his men could probably see me perfectly. By this time, they must have adjusted the TV cameras for infra-red pickup. They didn't even need any special infra-red lights; the hot vacuum tubes in the racks behind me would give off enough infra-red to illuminate me brightly. I began to regret that I had been so hasty in shooting out the glow-plates in the ceiling of the relay room.

How many shots had I fired? Eleven? Or Twelve? The automatic only held a dozen cartridges. I didn't want to take any chances, and I didn't want to stop and reload. I'd been using the CC guard's gun. I shoved it back in the holster and took the policeman's gun out of my waistband. It was a bigger, heavi-

er, more powerful weapon. I slid out the magazine quickly, checked it, and slid it back in. It was full.

But now what? I had to do something, and fast.

When in doubt, act. I pulled out the guard's gun again, hoping it had one more cartridge in it, and stuck it around the door. Without aiming, I pulled the trigger.

There was a satisfying roar of sound.

The second trigger pull resulted in an almost inaudible click.

*"Bert! Jackson! Go in and get him! He's fired twelve shots! Quick, before he re-loads!"*

At the same time, the lights in the darkened room came on. Montrose had ordered his men to charge.

The first one barrelled through the door like a clumsy elephant. Such stupidity. I clouted him across the side of the head with the flat of my pistol. He staggered, but didn't go down, so I clouted him again. This time he went down to stay.

There was a loud *crack!* and a bullet whined by my ear. Behind me, there was an explosive crash as the bullet buried itself in one of the relay racks. In front of me was the third assistant.

*"Jackson!"* Montrose shouted. *"You fool! You've shot out part of Section B!"*

Jackson wasn't paying any attention. I fired a second after he did, sending a bullet through his gun arm. The weapon flew out of his hand, and he turned to run back toward a door on the other side of the room, leaving his fallen buddy to my tender mercies.

He jerked open the door. Beyond it was the control room. I could see Montrose, looking startled, on the other side of the room. I let fly a shot at Jackson. It caught him, and he sprawled in the doorway, propping the door open.

Montrose hit a switch and all the lights went out again.

I dropped to my belly and fired another shot at the open door. The interior was still dimly lit by the green glow from the oscilloscope screens.

I waited and then fired again, higher, this time.

There was a loud *pop!*, then a weird, high-pitched hissing sound, followed by an animal scream. Montrose? I didn't know. I fired again, and the bubbling, hissing sound increased.

What the hell was going on in there? Was Montrose trying to trap me?

I waited for several minutes there in the darkness, listen-

ing to that queer boiling sound. I knew that Montrose didn't dare try to get through the open door; the green glow would outline him too well.

I started to edge myself forward, moving toward the door.

A cold, chilling breeze blew toward me from the control room. At first, I thought it was an open window. Montrose must have escaped! I crawled faster. The breeze got colder.

I suddenly felt very sleepy. I tried to stand up, but I could only get to my knees. Somewhere in there, I passed out cold. And I mean *cold!*

I woke up in New Bellevue, lying flat on my back in a hospital bed. There were several men grouped around me, but the only one I recognized was my old pal, John Mahafey. I was never so glad to see a friendly human face in my life.

"Charlie!" he bellowed. "It's about time you woke up! What the hell you going to do? Sleep your life away?"

"You found me?" Foolish question, but then I didn't feel very sensible.

"We found you," said one of the other men. He grinned a little. "FBI. We had to break down a couple of fire doors to

get at you, though. What happened?"

I told them what I'd done from the time I'd entered Central Park. I didn't want to mention the Tejado family just yet; if I was still in trouble, I wanted to keep them out of it.

"What took place down there?" I asked. "And what happened to Montrose?"

The FBI man looked grim. "Those last two shots you fired blew holes in one of the liquid helium feed pipes from the refrigeration system to The Brain. You were using a police armor-piercing automatic."

"And Montrose?"

"The helium came boiling out of that pipe and spewed all over Mr. F. Hamilton Montrose. When we got to him, we had to brush the frost off to see who it was."

"The helium boiled away fast, filling the rooms down there. It's inert, and you can't breathe helium. You just passed out from lack of oxygen."

"What about his three partners?" I asked.

His smile came back. "They're okay. In bad shape, but they'll live. One of them is suffering from a bad electrical burn, but he's not too badly shocked. One of them has a slight concussion, but he'll

wake up eventually. And one of them has a bullet in his insides, but he's coming along fine.

"He sang a fine tune, too. Told us all about Montrose and his megalomaniac plans. I don't think you need to worry about any charges against you, Councilman."

"I should hope that he doesn't!" Mahaffey thundered. "After what he's done for this town? I'm going to see to it that he gets a medal or something!"

"After what he did to this town?" The FBI man laughed dryly. Then he looked at me. "Just what *did* you do to foul up The Brain so completely? The City will have to know, so that it can take precautions against its ever happening again. Traffic was dead in this town for nearly an hour. There was utter chaos."

I started to explain, but Mahaffey cut in.

"Charlie didn't do a thing! Understand that? Nothing! The whole foul-up was Montrose's doing, and that's the way it's going to stand!"

"Certainly," agreed the FBI. "That's the story the papers will get. But maybe Mr. Lieth would like to guess at what *might* have happened."

I grinned back at him.

"Okay, here's what *might* have happened.

"Montrose was looking for me all over New York; so was everybody else. He had fiddled with The Brain so that it would do what he told it to do. And he had told The Brain to send every available cop to surround me, once I was spotted.

"Now, suppose, just suppose, that I had three confederates. They go to three widely separated parts of the city and phone various people — Mahaffey, here; several other members of the City Council; and the FBI. But instead of using their own voices, they play recorded messages from me. Naturally, as soon as The Brain hears my voice, the message is cut off, and an order goes out to every police car in the vicinity. Guided by The Brain, the patrol cars automatically drive toward the place where the call came from."

The FBI man looked at another agent standing next to him. He said nothing, but there was a question in his eyes. The other agent said: "Yeah, we got a call that was broken off."

"It was a wrong number," said Mahaffey complacently.

"Sure," said the FBI man. "Go on, Mr. Lieth."

"All right, now; get the picture. All these cops heading for one place, in automatically controlled cars.

"Then, a couple of minutes later, there's *another* call from a booth clear across the city. And The Brain gives the same orders there! It *has* to! It can't figure out how I moved around so fast, but then, it isn't really very bright.

"Then a third call comes in, and the same thing happens.

"By that time, my first confederate has left the phone booth that the first call came from and gone to another one several blocks away to make the fourth call. The second confederate does the same thing, and so on."

The FBI man nodded slowly. "I see. The Brain thought you were in nine different places at once, and tried to send all the police in the city to all of them at the same time. Of course, civilian traffic had to be halted for all those emergency calls. No wonder the city was jammed up from Brooklyn to the Bronx! Wow!"

One of the other agents said: "But, then couldn't *any* wanted criminal do the same thing?"

"No," I said. "Not if The Brain were working properly.

You see, Montrose had given my capture top priority so that I'd be caught and he could kill me. But a properly operating Brain would put the good of the City above such petty things."

"And besides," the FBI man interjected, "a properly working Brain doesn't listen in on phone calls, no matter who makes them." He looked at Mahaffey. "Councilman, you're right; the whole thing was entirely due to the illegal machinations of F. Hamilton Montrose—and we'll leave it that way. We might have to speculate a little in our reports, but they're strictly secret, and we can't prove anything, anyway."

John Mahaffey gave him a big, red-faced smile. "Sir, you are one swell cop."

"Thank you," said the FBI man. He looked back at me again. "There's one hole in your theory of what *might* have happened, you see. We know you couldn't possibly have had any confederates. Not possibly."

"You know that, eh?"

"We know it. We were watching all your known friends as soon as the phoney embezzlement charge came out. We know you didn't contact any of them. So you

couldn't have had any confederates. So your theory doesn't hold water, and we can't say anything about it. That's that!"

"Thanks," I said. "It could cause me to lose an election if something like that were bandied about. I'd hate to be blamed for the jam-up this morning."

"So would I," said the FBI man. "But Montrose won't mind—not now. Probably the DA will want to have a few words with you later, too."

"I'll take care of him," I said.

"I'm sure you will, Councilman. Well, good night." He walked toward the door and opened it. Then he turned around. "By the way," he said. "There are three people outside who have been trying to see you for the past hour: A chunky man, an old lady, and a little slip of a girl. Three of them. Named Tejado. They seem to be worried about you." He kept his face perfectly straight.

"Send 'em in," I said. "I'll see 'em."

"Some of your constituents, no doubt," he said.

"No doubt," I agreed.

He nodded and went out the door, closing it gently behind him.

THE END

# SPONTANEOUS GENERATION

By ELLERY LANIER

The idea behind Frankenstein and many pieces of fiction—the artificial generation of life has become "old hat" from the fictioneer's standpoint. Not so in the fact field, as Mr. Lanier outlines in this article.

A MAZING counterfeits of life, real enough to fool scientists have been produced by the new science of Plasmogony.

Ordinarily, we think something is alive, if it has muscles to move itself around, if it has a stomach and intestines to digest food, and if it has sex organs to reproduce itself with. This includes plants as well as animals. But the single cell animal, amoeba, does all these things without special organs by simply changing its own body into feet for moving, its skin into mouths for feeding, and it just makes itself a stomach whenever it needs one. Yet with all this complicated action, the amoeba only looks like a drop of oil in water.

Scientists in the field of

Plasmogony tried to duplicate the living action of the amoeba with simple oil drops. They were successful!

The oil drops reproduced almost every detail of animal life; feeding themselves, digesting food, and almost unbelievably—excretion, was also performed. More than that, the tiny oil drops were choosy in their food intake, they moved around, breathed, and drew back sharply from irritation. They were named Colpoids. Different kinds can be made to duplicate any one celled animal. Some have even gone so far as to make artificial shells for themselves out of glass fragments. They can even be 'killed' by poisoning.

The mystery arises . . . where is the life force in an

oil drop that moves, makes 'choices', and so on. Are they really alive?

Research into these life duplicates has made it possible to study the hidden actions of living things. It is now possible to create a whole world of artificial life forms. Such highly developed artificial structures could resemble living organisms so closely that the line between them and ourselves would be hard to draw.

The many theories about life's origin can be reduced to two basic ones. Either life has existed always or it just started from non-life. In Panspermia, (the non-beginning theory), life is thought to be bits of astro-plankton, called cosmozoa, floating out among the interplanetary and intergalactic spaces, and driven from star to star by the pressure of light. The live cosmozoa jetsam and flotsam land on a planet and start evolution there. Living things on different worlds might be cousins but behave and look differently, just as animals in isolated Australia are different from animals on other continents of the world.

But the Panspermia theory only pushes the question of life's origin to other planets. Either life existed always or

it started at some specific time in the past, a time that can be tracked down.

Respectable scientists had a tight taboo on such discussions until only a few years ago. Spontaneous Generation had been discredited as a subject for scientists to study. It meant hocus pocus; like legends of rats being born from mud, geese from barnacles, lions rising from the sands of the desert, and worms being born from rotting meat. The story of Dr. Faustus told how he made a little man called the homonculus, in a pot of boiling chemicals at midnight. The notion of the scientist playing with life forces was popularized in the story of Frankenstein and the monster. Scientists generally felt embarrassed about the subject.

But human curiosity can never be suppressed. The wonder about life's origin had come at a late point in prehistoric times. Cave men did not worry about the origin of life. To them everything was alive and no one ever really died. Death was only a magical sleep that would disappear when the hypnotic spell causing it was lifted. They buried the dead doubled up with hands and legs securely bound to prevent the corpses from

arising at night to do mischief.

Even today, the natives on the island of Madagascar continue a ghoulish custom of digging up dead relatives on holidays and pouring honey into the decayed corpses mouths.

If the earth was alive so was the living body that came from it. If the soul was part of the body and stayed with it, there was no mystery about life's beginning. The development of religion changed this attitude. The soul came to be considered as separate from the body. It drifted away when the body decayed. It was easy to think that the life quality itself must have entered the body from somewhere, and so the mystery of life's origin entered human thought.

In 1957 a serious conference of scientists in various fields was called to discuss the problem of Spontaneous Generation. More amazing things may happen in life science than has happened to physics with the entry of rockets into artificially created orbits. It is now theoretically possible and even conceivable that a human being can be created in the laboratory. It is even conceivable to make duplicates of a living person. (This sci-

ence even has a name—Phoenixology).

The scientific study of life creation follows two directions that converge into one. One method is to artificially create the conditions of existence as they were on earth three billion or so years ago. Two Russian scientists who did this, claim to have seen life come into existence in the laboratory.

The other approach is to create artificial life forms chemically and watch their behavior.

Dr. Stanley L. Miller of Columbia University has successfully recreated the conditions on earth three billion years ago. At that time the oceans covered the earth and the average temperature was one hundred degrees. The sky was brilliant with lightning, and there was more ultraviolet light than there is now. There were lots of very active volcanoes and much more radioactivity than at present.

All this commotion of electricity, heat, and ultraviolet, churned the steaming methane and water vapor atmosphere into producing the first carbon compounds from which life could emerge. (This was the theory before Dr. Miller's experiment).

Because of the world's com-

plete sterility, it was possible to accumulate large quantities of carbon compounds in the ocean. Proof of this fact are the deep deposits of graphite formed in this way. These are found in the ancient rocks of the Azoic or lifeless stage of the earth's history.

In our time, the stocking up of carbon compounds is impossible since the microbes would devour any of it immediately. But 3 billion years ago the earth was covered with a thick soup that simmered for millions of years.

Dr. Miller's experiments reproduced these early conditions. His apparatus consisted of (he is still conducting these experiments) two pyrex glass bottles connected with glass tubes. One of the bottles had a pair of tungsten electrodes inside to produce sparks while the other bottle held water that was boiled to create a steaming circulating atmosphere. This steam went through the tubes into the electrode bottle where the sparks, just like the ancient lightnings, shook up the atoms and put them together again in new arrangements. Gasses similar to those observed on the planet Saturn (hydrogen, methane, and ammonia) were put into the bottle to duplicate the theoretical ideas about the

ancient atmosphere of the earth.

The rearranged atoms were cooled and collected from a tube in the connecting glass tubes. Many runs of the device were made some lasting two weeks, and various different combinations were tried. The resulting chemicals were the amino, hydroxy, and aliphatic acids. These are known to be the necessary building blocks for the creation of life. They are the same raw materials that showered down in great rains into the swelling oceans of the ancient earth.

The latest theory is that these amino acids are groups of atoms that form themselves into bunches that stay in the same 'linkage' arrangement and react with other bunches to make them take on a similar form. In this way the complicated brickwork of life is started.

But this is only the beginnings of what is to become biological action. Anything alive must handle chemical energy in a regulative way; it must capture material and energy from its surroundings, undergo growth and reproduction, etc. The element phosphorus is useful to life because of its ease in getting one of its electrons to carry a unit of

energy that later can be used for a chemical reaction. This reaction can condense small molecules into a long spirally shaped chain that is just a giant molecule with the mechanical power of being a template that duplicates itself.

The origin of the physical basis of thought is one of the more intriguing questions in the "origin of life" problem. Nerve activity requires electrolytes. (Chemicals that can be decomposed by an electric current). This is necessary to study hormones. Hormones directly influence electrolytic relations in animals. It is difficult to conceive of genetic information as merely a computing machine's punched tape. The means of communication are inseparable from their storage and the duplication of information. Experiments to seek out the origin of nerve and hormone creation, in which the electrolytes are most important should also bring us close to the secret of life.

All the boiling and stewing chemicals in the ancient ocean produced many colloids. (Colloids are in-between substances, half solid, half liquid, like a jelly). These colloids developed great complexity, eventually becoming fats, proteins and carbohydrates.

The primitive beginning of individuality occurred when positive and negative, electrically charged groups of colloids, joined to produce droplets called coacervates. These coacervates absorbed water on their surface to form membranes.

Scientists have studied these coacervates intensively. Like life itself, they grow by absorbing the surrounding medium and increase to a certain size at which point they split in two like cells. These coacervates are indeed the missing link between the living and the non-living. Their insides were very much like the stewing ocean in which they were created.

The amazing thing is that after billions of years we still carry the ancient ocean solution in our own blood streams. Our blood is not derived from the modern ocean but from the ancient one. Our blood temperature is the same as that of the ocean 3 billion years ago. We carry the same salts and dissolved nutrient matter (proteins, fats, sugar), that were part of the ancient ocean. In effect the ancient world was covered with an ocean of human blood equivalent.

In addition to our blood, the other two circulation systems

in the body are filled with ocean fluid. The cerebro-spinal fluid that fills our brain and spinal cord is a clear colorless salt solution of strictly oceanic type. The same holds true for the urinary drainage system.

Another secret of life is the manner in which these salty fluids pass through the body membranes in either direction and regulate the passage of water.

An artificial life specimen to study this effect has been perfected. It is an artificial cell with a membrane capable of attracting or giving off water under conditions similar to living tissues.

A thick drop is picked out of a gelatin solution with a hollow glass rod. The drop is left hanging in the air for a few hours and then dipped onto a 5% solution of ordinary tannic acid. In about ten minutes a thin iridescent film forms on the surface of the drop, which will permit the passage of water but will not pass a salt, sugar or other solution. This is a semi-permeable membrane.

With the drop still hanging on the hollow glass rod it is lowered into a tannic acid solution and a little salt is added to the inside of the drop through the glass tube. Be-

cause of the semi-permeability of the tannic acid skin, the salt attracts water from the solution into the drop, since the salt itself cannot pass through the film. The drop swells up like a balloon.

This is called 'Osmotic' pressure. It is a very powerful force and serves to keep living things in shape.

If salt is added to the tannic acid on the outside of the drop, it will shrivel, because now the salt draws water from inside that drop out through the skin.

Our own red blood cells act just like this artificial cell. Red blood cells are only tiny bags filled with salt solution and surrounded by an elastic film, and floating in another salt solution of the same type as that inside them. If red blood cells are put in distilled water, the salts inside them draw in water just as the artificial gelatin drop cell did. If watched under a microscope the blood cells can be seen to burst like tiny red balloons.

This 'Osmotic' pressure is one of life's power sources. In the tiny roots of plants it can squeeze into and burst open heavy cast iron pipes. The osmotic pressure of a 4% sugar solution is nearly equal to a water column one hundred

feet high. It is the invisible driving force for life's growth.

Artificial life forms that grow by the power of osmosis are easily produced and they are most fantastic to watch. Sodium silicate usually called water glass is poured into a jar and different metallic salts are dropped into it. They form an insoluble slimy substance that acts like a membrane. Beautiful plant like forms grow up with flowers and buds in many colors. Cobalt salts for example grow into thin blue stems with pink buds. An entirely artificial garden can be grown this way.

A French scientist has grown osmotic mushrooms that fooled expert botanists by their perfect details. Even artificial wriggling worms have been made.

Most astonishing of all has been the creation of artificial nerves that look just like the cells in the human brain.

These fake life forms even grow toward the light. But they do not have the power to reproduce themselves indefinitely and they are very perishable. One artificial life device duplicates the automatic impulses that keep our hearts in action. A simple iron wire immersed in acid and surrounded by a glass tube with a small glass inverted

tube cover, can be made to send out continuous rhythmic electrical waves that imitate the pacemaking nerves that regulate our heartbeats.

All these strange experiments are bringing us much closer to the secret of life. From our present knowledge, it is plain that life was not an abrupt jump from non-living to living matter. Instead there is a vague shadowy borderline that lasted for hundreds of millions of years.

First, there were white-hot carbon vapors that produced carbides and later carbon-hydrogen compounds. We now know that life in all its complexity is nothing more than one of the innumerable properties of carbon. A hundred years ago the only carbon compounds available were from plants and animals. Now they can be made artificially (the name 'organic compounds' is still used for all carbon compounds).

The carbon atom has the strange but easily explained (mechanically, that is,) property of holding large structures of atoms together. This is what makes the vast complexity of life possible. Methane (used in Dr. Miller's experiments) is one of the simplest carbon compounds.

After the early earth had cooled a little, the endless varieties of carbon compounds arranged themselves in many kinds of groupings that finally became the coacervate droplets described earlier. This study of ancient chemistry called Paleochemistry holds many secrets buried in rocks that have waited billions of years to be dug up by scientists.

One theory in Paleochemistry holds that life needed a very peculiar region to start in. This was the face or edges of crystals like quartz where reflected light could have a photo-chemical effect on the organic compounds and cause them to concentrate and collect in unusual bunches that had order and reacted on each other. Something like this happens when a film is exposed to light.

These primitive life drops were just simple water bags that had to make everything (special chemicals) they needed from whatever material was on hand. They needed an unspecialized adaptive genius to survive and it is just possible that the crystals helped them. Life's connection with crystals goes very deep.

Crystal growth is very mysterious. Crystals grow in lifeless matter from tiny seeds,

and look the same all the way through. Living things also contain crystals but look different all over. If a small amount of gelatin is added to a salt solution the crystals that grow out of it will have leaves like a plant.

It was way back in 1858 that the Swiss chemist Carl Naegli used polarized light to discover that living tissue had tiny crystals in its structure. It took fifty years until other scientists recognized his discovery; that the building forces of living matter and non-living matter were the same.

Polarized light going through living crystal gets twisted in one direction only, while in non-living crystals it is turned in two directions. This has been very important for life. One theory claims that this is caused by the magnetic field of the earth, but another theory says that life got its optical twist in one direction when the moon separated from the earth giving a spiral-like whirl to all the matter of the earth. (Probably a right hand twist).

No other chemical characteristic of life is as distinctive as this optical activity (or as interesting).

When the early life drops—coacervates — acquired the

ability to use light energy in converting the chemicals around them into parts of themselves, the possibility for life increased. The energy of sunlight was available for evolution. It is thought that the earliest viruses developed in this manner.

The first droplets with power to make duplicates of themselves (not yet living) had a great advantage. They quickly started to absorb all non-duplicating droplets. The greatest battle before the appearance of life was won. As soon as a cluster of these coacervates acted as a unit the first cell was born. The earlier coacervates and viruses could not synthesize their own food, they could only absorb it.

The true organism can build up its own substance from simpler materials. The ability to use light was essential. Life uses light directly or eats other life that does. In the earliest attempts at life the ability to synthesize food was decisive and those droplets that could use light for this purpose won out.

The first almost living bits found themselves surrounded by lots of organic stuff like that produced in Dr. Miller's experiment. When the supply reached the exhaustion point,

most but not all of the early life-attempts died, and something like a truly living thing came into existence. It had to create the building blocks for its own body.

These were like viruses and they became genes which acted like template models to impress duplicate models of themselves. Besides being self-duplicating, they had the power to direct nearby material to become replicas of themselves, like the game Simon Says. (Present day viruses are thought to be degenerated living fossils of these ancient viruses from which we are descended).

Viruses are true borderline beings. W. M. Stanley was able to reduce the tobacco virus to a pure crystal which later became a virus on the tobacco leaves. Many scientists refuse to say whether a virus is living or not living.

Spontaneous generation involved a change from chemical simplicity through to complexity of a type that led to its own repetition. It needed a mechanism for trapping and repeating the component reactions that had made it possible. The fulfillment of this need was really the point of the origin of life.

It was a painfully slow process with many desperate

gambles and billions of fatal losses. There was a terrible ruthlessness in the destruction of the endless attempts at life. This blind and seemingly vicious struggle in which no quarter was shown, reveals the basic unsentimental nature of life at its lowest level.

But very quickly, after the first true life appeared, another equally if not more powerful force came into play. This was the force of symbiosis or mutual help. It was symbiosis that made it possible for life to lift itself and evolve in spite of the dog eat dog pattern of the beginning.

The greatest remaining mystery in the origin of life is the part played by the hardly known and elusive Mitogenetic rays. These radiations are important to fundamental living and control much of the vitality of growth. Although they sound like the talk of half-cocked occultists they are real enough. They were discovered in scientific laborator-

ies through study of plant roots.

It was found that if tiny rootlets were pointed at other roots the pointed at spot had an increased growth rate. A thin sheet of quartz placed between the two roots did not cut off the radiations. A glass sheet did. The radiations could also be sent by mirror reflections. These life stimulating radiations were also found in animals.

The rays have a very low intensity. Film used to detect other radiation is not sensitive enough to detect it. They can only be traced by the microscopic effect they have on living tissue.

But these tiny forces are like the drops of water that cut holes in hardest stone. They are the most delicate phenomena in all nature and it takes a very special attitude and skill to even detect their presence.

It may be that the final secret of life will be revealed when we learn their exact nature.

THE END

## ACCORDING TO YOU...

(Continued from page 7)

and terror with a crazy sense of humor. I laughed and shuddered at the same time.

Having been a science fiction fan for many years I can say that your magazine is colossal.

D. D. Jordan, Jr.  
54 S. 8th East  
Salt Lake City, Utah

Dear Ed:

The August issue of *Fantastic* was very bad. Why don't you people make up your minds? First you publish a good issue, then a bad one . . . and the letters give you nothing but praise. That guy who wants to marry you, he's nuts, he must be.

As for the Shaver Mystery—that's a mystery? I could write a more imaginative tale than that. Shaver must be an idiot to write such rot.

I hope to see improvement in the magazine.

Paul Shingleton, Jr.  
320 26th St.  
Dunbar, W. Va.

• Now what have you got against marriage, Paul? It's a fine, honorable institution!

Dear Editor:-

I just finished the second issue of *Dream World* and would like to make a couple of comments on it, along with *Fantastic* and *Amazing*. First of all I want to say that *Dream World* was, as a fantasy magazine, far superior to *Fantastic*. Reason: *Dream World* published fantasy, but sensible fantasy, almost science fiction. The plots were such that they could be handled as fantasy or science fiction. *Fantastic* contains besides fantasy (which is sometimes written as if the story was for children) and science fiction (which comes once in a blue moon and is sometimes silly) other types. This is what I really detest.

I have seen other complaints about that too but every time you make an evasive answer about it. For instance: "The Cheat," "Spawn of the Dark One," "Snake Pit," just to pick

a few at random. These stories didn't belong in the magazine and I was really unhappy when I read them. "Snake Pit" could and should be put in an adventure magazine. As for the other two, they shouldn't have even been printed.

"The Invisible Man Murder Case" was, I suppose, fantasy, but to me it was more mystery than anything else and pretty simple too. The only one which I thought was first rate was "The Illicit Egg." This was good fantasy and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

Getting back to the subject and I know that a lot of readers will agree with me: fantasy for fantastic, one of that straight and adventure stuff.

Chuck Cunningham  
301 Ridgewood Dr.  
Lexington, N. C.

• *We're looking for more eggs out of the nest "Illicit-Egg . . ." came from.*

Dear Editor:

I am a fairly new reader of science fiction, having read your magazines and other books for only about a year, but I am an addict pure and simple. Somehow I love the stuff and other plain ordinary fiction just doesn't seem the same.

It's gotten so that I don't even scan the contents of *Fantastic* and *Amazing* anymore; when I see them I just snap them up. I feel I can rely on you to have good stories, and so far only a few have disappointed me.

This may come as a shock to some of your readers but I like Valigursky. I've read quite a few letters knocking him, but don't you dare stop using his illustrations on the covers.

The September issue of *Fantastic* was very good. Only "Time Squeeze" had any s-f, to my brand of thinking, but I did like the other stories as well.

Mrs. Clyde R. White  
P.O. Box 2661  
Mulberry, Fla.

• *It's this editor's considered opinion that Valigursky is the best science fiction cover artist in the business.*

## CLASSIFIED

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MAXIMS On Animal Magnetism, by Dr. F. A. Mesmer. First English translation of his Original Principles & Procedures. Cloth, 78 pp, \$3.00. The Eden Press, Dept. E. Box 95, Mount Vernon, N. Y.

LOOKING to buy somebody's issues of Space Review. Ray Johnson, 662 East St., New Britain, Conn.

## PEN PALS

WRITER seeks correspondence with individuals possessing data, factual or legendary, anent subterranean tombs, temples, cities on islands in Caribbean Sea. Thomas R. Tyrrell—90 Cowles Ave., Yonkers 4, N. Y.

AGE 25, object correspondence. Interests: art, reading, s-f, others. Doris Meyer, 833 Agatite, Chicago 40, Ill.

WOULD like to hear from readers who could send me information dealing with s-f films, books, magazines, TV shows. Giovanni Scognamillo, Beyoglu, Istiklal Caddesi, Kallavi Sekak 36/3, Istanbul, Turkey.

## MISCELLANEOUS

NATIONAL Fantasy Fan Federation, the oldest fan correspondence club in U. S. Send \$1.60 for dues to Aney Lamb, Route One, Heiskell, Tenn. For free information write Seth Johnson, 339 Stiles St., Vaux Hall, N. J. N3F first in correspondence and fanac.

ROCKETS Unlimited, non-profit organization for the advancement of rockets, satellites, and control equipment. Write for application form. Rockets Unlimited, 1015 Atkin Ave., Salt Lake City, Utah.

## F. O. B. VENUS

(Continued from page 50)

Dr. Hinchley shrugged. Funny, the delusions patients will get. If he'd told this man about Clara, he'd have rationalized that it was all proof of what he'd been saying about Aliens taking over the minds and bodies of human women. A rather engaging theory, in a way—at least it might explain such things as the sudden craze for sack dresses. Hard to imagine a *real* woman wanting to dress like that.

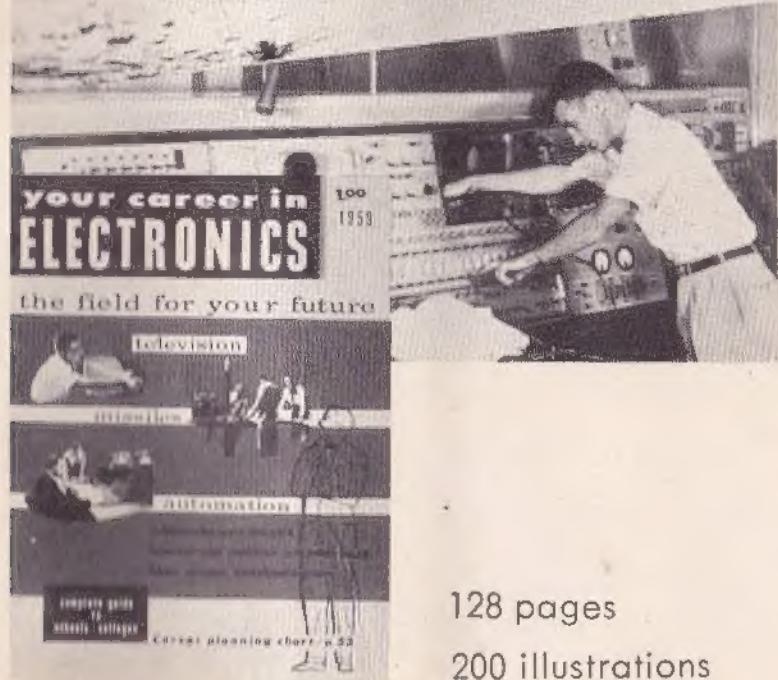
But that was nonsense. Dr. Hinchley, chuckling as he climbed the stairs, was just another husband contemplating the apparently inexplicable behavior of just another wife.

And when he opened the door, and Clara plunged the gleaming scalpel into his throat with surgical precision, he was still thinking—even as you and I—"Now, what do you suppose got into her lately?"

The last man on earth sat in a room. There was no knock on the door; only a faint hissing, as the creatures pumped in the lethal gas . . .

THE END

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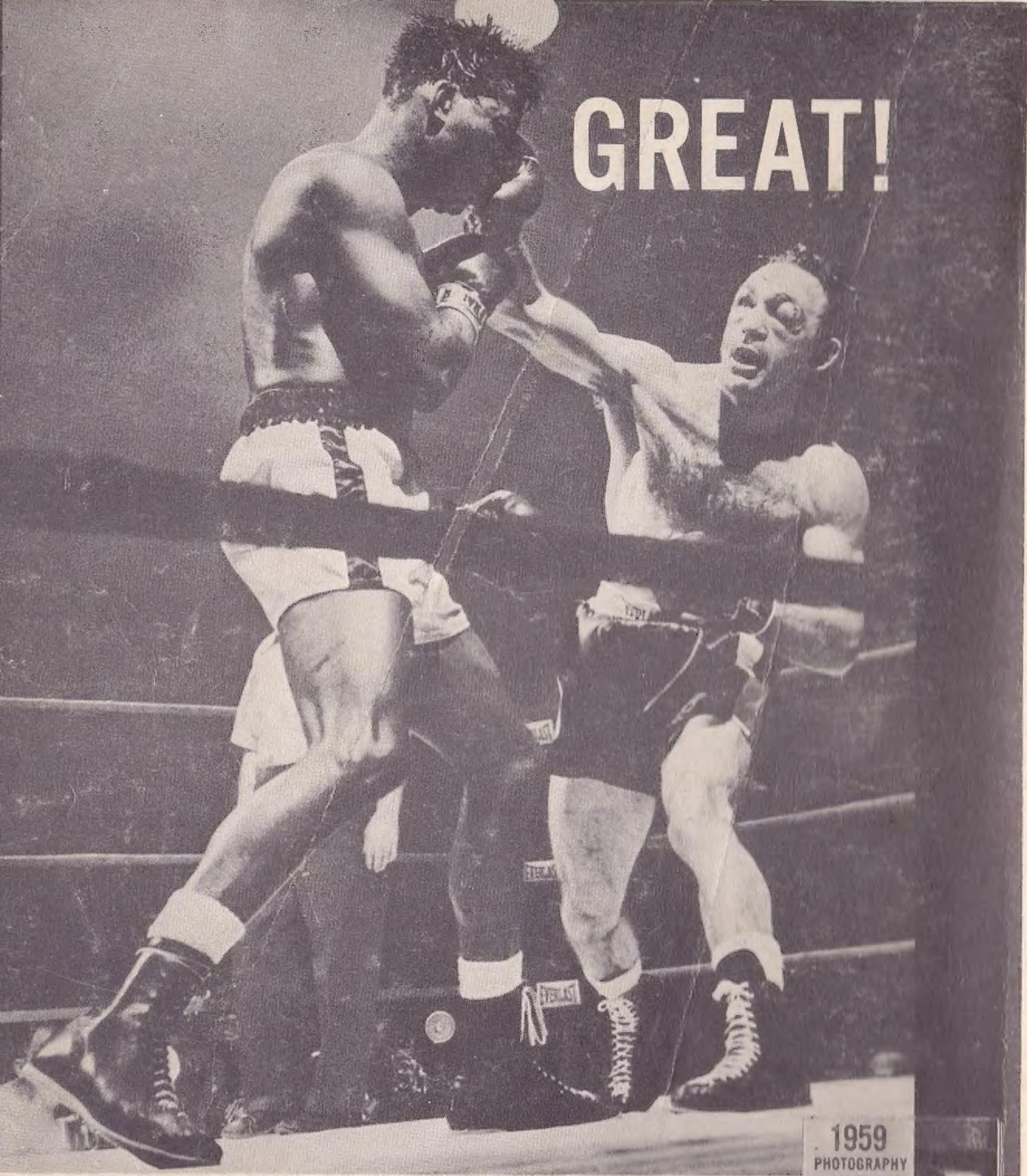
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